

NOVEL
5

Written by
Kennoji

Illustrated by
Matsuuni

DRUGSTORE in ANOTHER WORLD

~ The Slow Life of a ~
Cheat Pharmacist ~



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CHARACTERS

EIJL

MINA

VIVI

PAULA

NOELA

REIJI



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Seven Seas Entertainment

CHEAT KUSUSHI NO SLOW LIFE:
ISEKAI NI TSUKURO DRUGSTORE VOL. 5

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TRANSLATION: Elliot Ryouga

ADAPTATION: Kat Adler

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

COVER DESIGN: Hanase Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Anne

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori

PRINT MANAGER: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

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Chapter 1: The Stove Fire

DURING MY SHIFT at the drugstore, I heard Mina and Noela's bloodcurdling screams inside the house.

"Eeeek!"

"Garooooo?!"

Their cries were followed by the sound of frantic footsteps in the hallway.

What the heck are those two up to now? Since no customers were in the drugstore, I decided to go look.

Noela was in the hall, carrying a bucket of water.

"Hey! What's going on?!" I exclaimed.

"Boom! Ker-zoom! Garooooo! Was like that," she tried to explain.

I had no clue what she was describing. *Hrm. Is it me, or does something smell burnt?*

"N-Noela, what's taking you so long?!" Mina cried. I'd rarely heard her so panicked.

"C-coming!"

I followed the werewolf girl as she trotted down the hall. We wound up in the kitchen, where Mina was running around in a tizzy. The frying pan in her hand was, in fact, on fire.

"Gah!" I screeched. "F-fire!" *Wait—what's the right response here? Oh!*

"Mina, get the lid! The lid!"

"A-all right!" Still completely flustered, Mina quickly set the lid on the pan, trapping the fire. The three of us watched the terrifying flames fade.

"Whew," I sighed. "That threw me for a loop. Looks like we're in the clear."

"Th-thank goodness." Mina sat down, exhausted.

“S-so, uh...how’d that happen?”

“Well, Noela got really excited about making lunch today. I told her only to use a teeny bit of oil, but...”

I get it. Mina isn’t the type to mess up and start a stove fire, so Noela’s gotta be the culprit.

Mina explained that, as soon as she’d taken her eyes off the werewolf girl, Noela had lit the stove at full power and poured oil into a pan. The oil had apparently spilled onto the stove’s life stone, causing the fire we’d witnessed.

“Noela scared.”

“That makes two of us.” *I’m just glad we’re all okay.* “See? This is what happens when you don’t listen to Mina.”

“Arroo... Sorry, Master, Mina.”

I knew Noela hadn’t set the fire on purpose, but I couldn’t let her off the hook for this. She needed to understand how dangerous it’d been. “Look, Noela. If we’d left that stove fire unchecked, it would’ve burned down the entire house and drugstore.”

“Groo?!”

“You have to be careful from now on.”

“Yeah. Noela no more use stove.” Just like that, she was down in the dumps—and not because I was mad or lecturing her.

I guess realizing she could’ve burned our house down really upset her.

“I share the blame for taking my eyes off you, Noela,” Mina added gently.

Sulking, the werewolf girl quietly trudged out of the kitchen toward the living room.

Hrm. Noela never would’ve started that fire on purpose, but what was I supposed to tell her? If I’d emphasized how dangerous cooking fires were *after* a serious one, it would’ve been too late.

I used the term “stove” for our cooking device in this world, but it was different from stoves on Earth, since it had no safety features. I was grateful

that we could use a fire life stone to cook things easily, but still, managing the flames was difficult if you weren't used to it. In fact, at certain times of year, the Red Cat Brigade functioned more as the town's firefighters than as security.

"Let's have lunch at the Rabbit Tavern today," Mina cheerfully suggested, brightening the dark atmosphere that'd settled over the house. She left the kitchen, grabbing her wallet and shopping basket.

"Something to prevent fires," I murmured.

Ah—right! I can make a product that does that, so I never have to guilt-trip Noela about the stove again.

I poked my head into the living room. Noela was curled up on the couch, hugging her tail.

She's like a ball of fluff. "Think you could watch the store for me, Noela?"

"Noela almost burn drugstore to crisp," Noela replied, on the verge of tears. The usually overconfident werewolf girl had been reduced to a heap of negative energy. "Noela no good."

"There's no way to burn down the store by watching it. Don't worry."

"Yeah."

I patted Noela's head as she stood, then watched her trudge into the drugstore. *I should make her an extra potion.*

Entering the lab, I grabbed all the ingredients I needed for my new product. *Looks like I can make this with stuff we've already got in the house.* Following my medicine-making skill's instructions, I poured the ingredients into a bottle and shook it.

Blaze-B-Gone: Makes objects less flammable. Prevents fires. Rub on any surface for flame resistance!

Perfect. If I spread this blaze-b-gone on flammable surfaces, it'd be much harder to burn the house and drugstore down. I took the bottle and a brush

into the kitchen and began painting blaze-b-gone around the oven.

Brush. Brush.

“All right. If any fires pop up, this should keep them from spreading.”

I felt someone’s eyes on me, and I turned to see Noela looking at me inquisitively.

“What doing, Master?”

“Well, I’m spreading this stuff on surfaces in the house so they won’t catch fire.”

“Groo?! Master amazing!”

Right? With a cocky smile, I covered a sheet of paper with blaze-b-gone and set it on the stove. “Noela, if you ignited the stove, what would normally happen to this paper?”

“Fire swoosh!”

“Exactly. But if you spread blaze-b-gone on it...”

I turned the stove on. The life stone glowed red, shooting out a circle of small flames.

“Garoo! P-paper burning?!” Noela peered at the paper on the stove. It was roasting—I mean, it changed color—but it actually wasn’t on fire. “Arroo?! *Not* burning! Master make more! Lots more!”

“Huh? Er, well, that’s the plan.”

After pestering me to mix more blaze-b-gone, Noela took a bottle and brush and began painting the product all over the house and drugstore.

“How could I stay mad at you?” I sighed. *The idea of burning our home down really must’ve terrified her. Now it’s time to get this stuff to the Red Cat Brigade, since they’re Kalta’s firefighters.*

I headed to the brigade’s barracks and asked for Captain Annabelle.

“Wh-what is it, Pharmacist?” She curled her red ponytail around her finger.

“Give this a try, please.” I handed the confused Annabelle a bottle of blaze-b-

gone, explaining how the product worked.

Annabelle and I soon gathered the other mercenaries so I could give them a proper briefing on the stuff. They reacted as I expected.

“Whoa!”

“W-we’ll have way fewer fires to deal with!”

“And the ones we *do* put out won’t be so scary!”

“Do ya think this stuff might work on fire *magic* too?”

I had my doubts about that; I hadn’t made blaze-b-gone with magic attacks in mind.

However, the mercenaries were thrilled at the prospect and began spreading blaze-b-gone on their armor. “We’ll become superhero firefighters protecting the townsfolk!”

After closing the drugstore, Noela made dinner—under Mina’s watchful eye, obviously. Both girls were careful, treating Noela’s earlier failure as a learning experience. Thanks to the sense of safety the blaze-b-gone created, Noela seemed back to normal.

“Noela make stove *really* hot now!”

“You probably shouldn’t make it *too* hot. Okay?”

“Garroo! Leave to Noela,” she snorted.

Hearing rumors about the Red Cat Brigade’s new product, other mercenaries, soldiers, and adventurers popped up at Kirio Drugs in search of blaze-b-gone. The flameproofing stuff sold like hotcakes to tons of people, making it one of our signature items. As a result...

“Doctor, my frontline officers are reporting that the humans have gotten smarter and that fire magic is terribly ineffective on them these days,” Ejil told me, scowling. “I gather there are geniuses besides you out there, hmm? They’re truly formidable.”

Er...my bad, Ejil!

Chapter 2:

Teaming Up with the Tool Shop

THE MONEY-CRAZY young woman known as Paula had once again dropped by the drugstore.

“Hey! I’m here!” she called. “Sorry to keep you waiting, Rei Rei. Let’s brainstorm!”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s great that *you’ve* got free time for that, but I’m actually pretty busy.”

“How rude! Rei Rei, didn’t anyone ever tell you the truth hurts?” Paula pouted, chastising me.

At least she understands that she’s got more free time than me.

“Welcome, Paula,” said Mina, coming in with a smile and a tray of tea and sweets.

“You know you don’t have to serve her anything, don’t you?” I asked Mina. “Imagine what’d happen if I had to tell Noela that Paula finished off our snacks.”

The werewolf girl was hiding behind a pillar, watching enviously as Mina carried the treats toward the tool shop owner.

“Sorry, Li’l Wolf,” Paula called. “Paula’s the kind of big girl who can’t cope without sugar.” She bit into one of the cookies Mina had brought over.

Noela wanted a cookie so bad, she was trembling. *I’ll give her a couple of mine later.*

“You’ve come by a lot lately, Paula,” Mina noted. “What do you discuss with Mr. Reiji? You mentioned brainstorming?”

“That’s me and Rei Rei’s naughty little secret, you know?”

Mina smiled, but I saw the shadow lurking behind it. *C’mon, Paula. Stop trying to freak her out.*

“Sorry, Mina,” I interjected. “Can we tell you the details once we’ve wrapped

things up?”

“Oh! You two are creating something together again?!”

“Yeah, exactly.”

After mixing the blaze-b-gone, I’d immediately thought of making a similar product with a different application. Remembering that Paula and I had paired up a while ago to make a fridge, I’d gone to the tool shop owner to discuss my new idea immediately.

She’d been all for it. “Whoa, Rei Rei. That’ll be straight-up ridiculous! It’ll sell, like, kazillions! What are you, some kind of idea monster?!”

Paula had swung by nearly every day to discuss business and kill time, and today was more of the same. Presently, the two of us were crunching numbers on paper.

“So you basically jerk it till it goes sploosh, right?”

“Can you please not word it like that? And it won’t go ‘sploosh.’ More like ‘fwoosh!’”

“Oh. Gotcha.” Paula furrowed her brow, scratching her nose with her quill pen. “Well, I can’t be sure about this till I talk to a craftsman. It sounds tough.”

We were working on something that existed in pretty much all of Earth’s schools, offices, and residences. Just one in any building could keep the place from going up in flames if a fire broke out. However, recreating the product in this world was proving a tough nut to crack. The tricky part would be making each one we produced work the same way.

“The tool shop’s got plenty of wind life stones,” Paula mused. “Problem is, once they get old, they’re less effective. Wanna buy ‘em, Rei Rei? Retail price, of course.”

“What, no discount for a friend?”

“Of course not!” Paula chuckled.

Wind life stones, huh? “Hey, Paula, would it be possible to do something like...” I explained my idea, jotting it on the paper in front of us.

“Th-that seems doable! Let me go ask the craftsman.”

The greedy young woman stood, eyes gleaming at the prospect of riches, and ran out of the drugstore. Paula put the pedal to the metal whenever she so much as smelled cash.

I gave Noela a cookie Paula hadn't gotten around to eating, which the werewolf girl happily munched on. “What make, Master?” she asked, cookie crumbs around her mouth.

“A special tool to keep damage from spreading in a fire.”

“Groo? But blaze-b-gone make no fire.”

“Yeah. This is just an extra precaution.”

“Garoo?” Noela tilted her head to the side.

My suggestion today was apparently a hit with Paula, so I decided to start working on the chemical end of things. I entered the lab, and Noela followed with great curiosity. She helped me work, apparently as thanks for the cookie.

I shook the bottle, finishing the new product.

Extinguisher Fluid: Puts out fires more effectively than water.

With this stuff, we won't have to worry about fires breaking out.

“What this, Master?”

“A product for extinguishing fires.”

Noela peered with fascination at the bottled white liquid. “Water?”

“Nope. It works better than water.” By itself, though, extinguisher fluid wouldn't be much help if a fire broke out. That was why we needed a device to shoot it.

“Groo? Better than water...” Noela, full of wonder, opened the bottle and sniffed its contents.

I doubt that'll smell very good, buddy.

“Garoo? Smell nice.”

“Hunh...it does. Wait...” The lab door was wide open. “That sweet scent’s coming from the kitchen!”

“Noela! Mr. Reiji! I made some cookies!” Just as Mina came in with a basket of freshly baked treats, Noela dunked her hand into the extinguisher fluid, coating it with white goop. “M-Mr. Reiji?! Wh-what sort of revolting liquid are you forcing her to handle?!”

“Er, it’s extinguisher fluid. A new product I made.”

“Um... Pardon?” Mina was dumbfounded.

“Fights fire better than water, Mina,” Noela explained.

“Look, Mina, I think you might’ve jumped to conclusions here.” I sighed.

Panicking, Mina began making excuses. “N-not at all! You’re wrong! I-I totally knew what that was from the get-go! Mm-hmm!”

“Mina, cookie!” Noela tried to bully Mina into giving her sweets.

“Wash your hands. Otherwise, you can’t have anything.”

“Garoo! Gotcha. Wash now!” Noela zoomed out of the lab.

“Extinguisher fluid, hmm? I see!” Mina muttered and then quickly tried to leave.

“You know, you’re pretty perverted.”

“N-no, I’m not!” After her protest, she fled in embarrassment.

Jeez. Sighing, I went to wash my hands so I could have cookies too.

A few days later, Paula finally showed up again. “Our prototype’s done, Rei Rei!”

The tool was made of light, firm material. It had a tank for liquid, a trigger, and a muzzle at the end of a barrel. It was basically a water gun.

“You can jerk the trigger, and it’ll go off!” Paula exclaimed.

“Please stop describing it like that,” I said as I loaded extinguisher fluid into

the gun.

Paula had contracted a craftsman to make the tool. “After I talked to him, he went with the second blueprint,” she told me.

I’d suggested two designs for the fire extinguisher. The first resembled a fire extinguisher on Earth, with a regular nozzle and a tank. The second was the water-gun design.

Mina entered. “You and Paula designed another strange new product, Mr. Reiji?”

“Yup. Put this in someone’s house, and they can extinguish a fire fast if blaze-b-gone fails.”

“Wow!” Mina’s jaw dropped.

The extinguisher’s gun-like shape piqued Noela’s curiosity. She wagged her tail as she watched me load it.

“Master sh-shoot?!” Her eyes practically sparkled.

“I’m going to. This isn’t a toy, though. Got it?”

It was crystal clear that none of my words registered with the excitable werewolf girl. She wagged her tail wildly, staring at the water gun in my hands.

After loading the extinguisher, I pumped it a few times, raising the tank’s air pressure. I put my finger on the trigger, and I could immediately tell that it’d be harder to pull now.

Just then, I noticed small wind life stones around the gun’s muzzle. “Wait.”

“Ooh, you finally noticed?” Paula said. “If you charge the extinguisher with a teeny bit of magical energy, those life stones will respond, and whatever you fire will go way faster.”

“Awesome!” Faster ammo was more than enough to get me hyped up. Noela clearly agreed; her tail wagged even faster.

“Let’s give this baby a try,” I said, although I hadn’t yet tested the extinguisher fluid’s effectiveness. *The bottom line is that I want to shoot this thing!*

In the backyard, I coated a wooden crate with blaze-b-gone and then filled it

with flammable trash. “Go ahead, Noela!”

Noela shot sparks into the crate with a fire life stone, igniting the trash. “Flames!”

“Ready to shoot.” I nodded to the three onlookers. They nodded back with serious expressions. Supporting the gun with my left hand, I sent magical energy into the weapon and aimed at the flames in the crate. “Target locked. Fire!” I pulled the stiff trigger as hard as I could.

Zooooosh! Extinguisher fluid shot from the gun. It rode the wind the life stones produced and struck the inside of the crate. *Bwoosh!* The flames quickly vanished.

“I-It worked!” It’d been tremendously satisfying to say the cool lines I’d wanted to, and extinguishing the fire was the icing on the cake.

“You seem as though you’re having fun, Mr. Reiji.”

“Groo. Master look happy.”

“You’re all amped up, Rei Rei.”

I peered into the crate. The few drops of extinguisher fluid I’d fired had spread when they struck it, extinguishing about three quarters of the flames. “C-crazy!”

The others rushed over to look.

“The fire’s seriously gone! Just like that!” Mina was stunned.

“Master! Noela next! Noela next!” The werewolf girl tried to steal the gun out of my hands.

Paula nodded enthusiastically. “The prototype’s a success!”

Three different reactions.

“What should we call this thing, Rei Rei?” Paula asked, grinning at me.

I guess names are important. And a weapon—well, it’s not a weapon—like this deserves a good name. As I thought it over, Noela grabbed the extinguisher from me and pumped it.

Mina suggested the obvious term. “We could just call it a fire extinguisher, I

suppose.”

That made me think of the red extinguishers back on Earth. *Nope. No good.*
“This ain’t a fire extinguisher, Mina.”

The new tool’s uniqueness escaped Mina, and she tilted her head in confusion.

On the other hand, Paula agreed. “I totally get where you’re comin’ from, Rei Rei. Hey! How about calling it the fire eraser?”

“Ooh—sounds badass!”

“Then it’s decided! The eraser! The eraser...” Paula repeated the extinguisher gun’s name.

I did likewise. “Eraser Prototype Unit One!” Just saying that out loud got me keyed up.

Paula and I made eye contact and high-fived—I doubt either of us were even sure why.

A short distance away, Noela had the crate in her sights. She pulled the eraser’s trigger, shouting, “Fire!”

Zoosh! Extinguisher fluid hit the crate full force.

“Groo!” Apparently pleased that she’d struck her target, Noela pumped the gun again, readying the next shot.

“May I try as well, Noela?” Mina asked.

“No. Still Noela’s turn.”

That little jerk plans to mess around till there’s no extinguisher fluid left.

Paula just giggled. “Catch you later, Rei Rei,” she said, departing.

I know I came up with the eraser, but it’s wild that Paula and the craftsman were actually able to make it, I mused. I ought to be grateful to them both.

Once Noela had used up all the extinguisher fluid, Mina got her turn. She had no trouble using the eraser; it was straightforward enough for anyone to shoot as long as they didn’t completely psych themselves out.

“I’ve got to tell Paula to make more erasers,” I murmured. *Hey, we’re not exactly in a hurry. I can just tell her later.* In the meantime, I’d take Eraser Prototype Unit One and some extinguisher fluid to the Red Cat Brigade, since they dealt with fires.

“Hey, Griffy!” I called toward the stable beside the drugstore. “I’m heading out! Give me a ride?”

Griffy stood. “Kyu! Kyu!” I hadn’t taken Translator DX today, so I couldn’t understand what the griffin was saying, but it definitely seemed happy.

I hopped on Griffy’s back, and we began searching for Annabelle. Apparently, she was on patrol duty. When we reached Kalta’s outskirts, a bunch of kids gathered around us.

“It’s Griffy!”

“Griffy!”

“Kyu?”

Kids loved petting Griffy’s plumage now that it had grown out. It wasn’t as soft as Noela’s fur, but it was still pretty darn smooth.

“Hey, Pharmacist! Takin’ the monster for a walk?”

Seems like our search is over. Three other mercenaries were with Annabelle; they must’ve been doing their rounds as a group and noticed us immediately; Griffy stuck out like a sore thumb.

“Yup. I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone by giving you this.” Hopping down from Griffy’s back, I handed Annabelle the eraser and some extinguisher fluid.

“Hrm? What’re these, Pharmacist?”

“Remember that blaze-b-gone stuff I made a while back to prevent fires? Well, if a fire’s already broken out, you should use these.” I explained the extinguisher fluid’s effects to Annabelle as well as how to use the eraser.

Much to my surprise, Annabelle seemed intrigued by everything but the eraser itself. “Hrm. So without the gun, the extinguisher fluid’s useless?”

“Nope! A bottle of extinguisher fluid could put out a fire even without the eraser.”

“Then...folks could just throw bottles of it at fires, right?” Annabelle chuckled. “Heh! Now ain’t *that* useful?!”

I hesitated. “Yes and no, Annabelle.”

“Come again?”

“Well, throwing bottled extinguisher fluid at a fire could be fine. If someone missed, though, they’d waste that bottle,” I reasoned.

The other mercenaries butted in to support me. “You just don’t get it, Boss!”

“Yeah, he’s right, Boss! Throwin’ bottles wouldn’t be as cutting-edge!”

“Who gives a damn when it comes to firefightin’?!” Annabelle demanded. “It ain’t no game!”

She was absolutely right, so nobody had a response.

“But, eh, I suppose the pharmacist has a point,” she admitted. “If someone panicked and missed the fire by a mile, that’d be that. Besides, old folks and kids ain’t got great aim. I suppose we’ve just got to get used to whatever the heck this thing is, eh?” She stared at the eraser with a discerning eye. “We’ll practice with it.”

“Thanks a lot,” I replied. “I really appreciate it.”

“Right. Well, we’ll be gettin’ back to work, then. See ya.” Annabelle spun the eraser, finger still on the trigger, and then casually slipped the firearm into her belt.

What the hell? That was awesome! I want to try doing that too!

When I got back to the drugstore, Noela asked, “Where eraser, Master?”

“I gave it to Annabelle. She and the Red Cat Brigade are going to use it to fight fires.”

“Garoo?!”

Noela must’ve thought she’d get to play with the eraser some more once I returned. The truth seemed to pull the rug out from under her.

Chapter 3:

The Town-Wide Showdown

PAULA HAD ASKED me and Griffy to come by the tool shop, so I rode the griffin to her place. When I arrived, I encountered a wagon covered in a tarp outside the store. *It looks packed. What the heck does Paula have in there?*

“Hey, Paula, I’m here!” I peeked under the tarp just as Paula came out of the shop.

“You’re so slow, Rei Rei!” she complained. “I seriously thought I’d starve to death waiting for you!”

“Come on. You didn’t wait that long.” I gave her a look, then asked what was on my mind. “So, what’s the big deal? Why’d you need me to bring Griffy over?”

“Kyu?” Griffy cocked its head inquisitively.

Paula cackled without answering, and her glasses glinted suspiciously. “Behold!” She pulled the tarp off the wagon, revealing what was hidden beneath—a mountain of fire erasers.

“Holy crap!” I exclaimed.

“Kyu! Kyu! Kyu?!”

“Bwa ha ha ha!” Paula laughed again as Griffy and I stood there, amazed. “I’m going to sell these to the townsfolk! What do you think will happen then?”

“They’ll be better at putting out fires?” *I mean, the eraser is a fire extinguisher.*

“Wrong!”

“Huh? I’m 100 percent right!”

“If every household in Kalta has an eraser, we can hold a huge tournament!” Paula exclaimed.

So that’s what this is about.

The tool shop owner explained that if you replaced the extinguisher fluid in the eraser’s tank with regular water, you could use it as a water gun.

I hesitated. *That actually sounds fun.*

“C’mon, Rei Rei. Pretty please?” Paula pleaded like a mewling cat. “Let’s do it! We’ll hold a tournament and sell every fire eraser for ten thousand rin!”

That seemed pricey. “I don’t know. It’s kind of...”

As I expressed doubt, Paula trembled. “L-Look, Rei Rei. If we don’t sell all these erasers, it’ll be a disaster! I told the craftsman we’d make tons of rin off ‘em. That’s why he put together so many! On top of that, I borrowed cash for the materials from a bunch of people. We don’t have a choice. There’s no turning back, or I’m dead!”

Paula’s bloodshot eyes were, to be frank, terrifying. *I guess ten thousand rin for a fire extinguisher isn’t bad.* The price only seemed ridiculous if you considered the eraser a water gun.

“Rei Rei, help a friend out, please! I’m begging you.”

“Fine.”

“Yay! I love you, Rei Rei!”

As usual, I didn’t acknowledge Paula’s endearment. “We’ll have to teach people how to use the erasers, though. And they’ll need to practice. Still, a tournament should be fun if we treat it like a survival game.” The phrase “survival game” seemed to confuse Paula, so I told her to ignore my musings.

“We should jerk some event funding out of Lord Valgas,” Paula suggested.

“Seriously, can you please stop using the ‘J’ word like that?” *Not that she’s wrong.*

“I’m gonna handle the event-planning deets. You handle the lord,” Paula instructed, passing the buck my way. “Good luck!” She headed back into the tool shop and closed the door.

“So, Paula wanted me to bring you so you could pull this wagon, huh?” I asked Griffy.

“Kyu! Kyuu!”

As I raised my arm, Griffy stepped forward, lowering its head and rubbing

against my hand. *Self-service headpats*. I harnessed the tame griffin, and it pulled Paula's wagon to Lord Valgas's manor.

Elaine apparently saw Griffy and I arrive, since she was the first person to come through the manor gates to greet us. "Sir Reiji! What brings you here today?"

"Perfect timing, Elaine. I need to talk to your father about something."

The girl immediately looked as though she'd been stabbed. "Y-you're here to ask Father for my hand in marriage?! It's finally happening!" She peered at the tarp-covered wagon. "That must be your dowry!"

No, Elaine, those're just fire extinguishers we're going to use as water guns. If this wagon were packed with my dowry—wait, am I the bride here?!—it'd be a ridiculous amount of money, given the size of the load.

"S-someone! Anyone!" Elaine clapped, summoning a maid. She squirmed as she explained the situation to the servant, her cheeks beet red. "What am I going to do? Sir Reiji's *proposing*! It's like a dream come true!"

Uh...what should I say? She's totally misread this situation.

The maid greeted me and then darted into the manor.

"U-um..." I began. "Excuse me, Ela—"

"I'll take you to the reception room, Sir Reiji!"

Without letting me finish, Elaine guided me through the manor's large doors, leading me to the reception room as she'd promised. Griffy stayed in the courtyard with the wagon full of "dowry"—aka the erasers.

The young noblewoman was still blushing as she sat down next to me. After waiting a bit, I heard footsteps, and Lord Valgas and his wife came in.

"So, the time's finally come." Bitter tears poured from Valgas's eyes.

"My love, isn't it our parental duty to wish Elaine well?" Lady Flam asked him.

"Y-yes. You're quite right." He sniffled hard, dragging a stream of snot back in.

With Elaine's parents seated across from me, I cut to the chase.

“What?!” Lord Valgas shouted. “You mean, you’re *not* here to ask for Elaine’s hand?”

I smiled awkwardly. “Er...Lady Elaine kind of got ahead of herself.”

Mortified, Elaine turned bright red. “S-Sir Reiji, you fiend!” she cried, running from the room.

I’m not a fiend, thank you very much.

Lord Valgas sighed loudly. “What a shock. I thought I was on death’s door.”

So he’ll die when Elaine gets married?

With the misunderstanding out of the way, I pitched the erasers and the town-wide water-gun tournament to Lord Valgas.

“That’s the object in question, correct?” He gestured to the eraser, which sat on a low table between us.

“Uh-huh.” I gently pushed it toward him.

He picked up the eraser, inspecting it like a jeweler examining an intricate piece.

“Pulling the trigger shoots a fluid that extinguishes fires,” I said. “This tournament could be a fire-prevention training session for the townsfolk. Paula and I thought we might as well turn it into some kind of competition.”

Lady Flam clasped her hands. “My word! Preparing Kalta for fires in this manner is quite a noble cause.”

Lord Valgas nodded. “We should allow townspeople from throughout our lands to participate.”

I’d heard that House Valgas’s territory primarily consisted of small towns and villages. When fires broke out, water from life stones never contained them; townsfolk had to create bucket brigades from nearby rivers and wells. That wouldn’t have been the case if people proficient in water magic lived nearby, but those folks didn’t visit remote towns like Kalta without reason.

I explained how Paula, the craftsman, and I had made the erasers. “This tournament could indirectly reduce fire damage in Kalta, so House Valgas

should take the lead in supporting it,” I concluded.

No one in Kalta had ever prepared for fires that thoroughly, and Lord Valgas seemed all for it. “Raising the townsfolk’s awareness of fire prevention, giving them a safe way to practice for an emergency, and turning it into something of a festival—what a fantastic idea!”

Looks like he’s down.

“I’d be happy to fund your event,” he said.

“Thank you so much!” We exchanged a firm handshake.

“I’d like to participate in the tournament as well, Sir Reiji.”

“So that’s why you *really* approved it.” *I get that.*

“Well, I have no choice,” Valgas replied. “Will that be all right?”

No choice? I guess it probably wouldn’t look good if a noble said he wanted to grab one of these suckers and splash around with the commoners. I smiled.

“Mm-hmm. I suppose you’ll be forced to take part.”

“Yes, indeed.” Lord Valgas grinned back. “This’ll be fun.”

“Agreed.” I mean, the only people who *wouldn’t* look forward to a water-gun tournament were those who’d given the boot to their joyous inner child.

Since Lord Valgas had signed off on the event, the planning sessions at my house went smoothly. The key participants were me, Paula, Annabelle (the tournament’s head of security), Alf from the general store, and Rena from the Rabbit Tavern. House Valgas’s butler, Rayne, also attended—he’d report all the matters discussed back to his lord.

“Man, Lord Valgas must be really pumped, considering the huge budget he gave us!” Paula said with a hearty guffaw.

“Actually, considering that his funding needs to go toward operating costs and security, his donation might be right on the dot,” Alf interjected.

The elderly butler, Rayne, chimed in. “Should these funds fall short, I shall inform my master.”

“No, that’s fine,” I assured him. “We’re good for now; we’re better off not

having a surplus.”

Too much cash would definitely become its own issue—especially when the planners included a bespectacled young woman who could use the budget for nefarious purposes.

“At any rate, what’re we calling this event?” Rena asked.

Everyone in the room went quiet, realizing that we hadn’t come up with a name.

“Ain’t it obvious?” Annabelle said. “The Kalta Battle Royale Festival, of course.”

Battle Royale Festival? Talk about a wild name.

However, none of the planners had a better name—I certainly didn’t—so we settled on Annabelle’s wacky suggestion.

“Battle Royale...Festival.” Noela practically trembled with excitement.

“Okay, on to the next topic.” I listed the issues we needed to figure out, and we paired off for a bit.

Soon enough, we’d hammered out most of the details. All that remained was to proceed as planned. At this point, we were starting to feel a bit like a chamber of commerce. *After a meeting like this, the old geezers in a chamber of commerce would probably go out and have a wild night on the town.*

That was beside the point, though. *I should stockpile some extinguisher fluid. It’ll probably sell like hotcakes when the tournament wraps up.*

And so everyone prepared for Kalta’s upcoming Battle Royale Festival.

Two weeks later, we’d built the festival headquarters in the town square, and prospective participants approached us one after another.

Mina told them what to do and how. “Choose a team name, please,” she said. “If you don’t have an eraser, you can buy one from the tool shop booth next to us.”

Man, I’m so glad we brought Mina.

In the tool shop booth, Paula explained how the eraser worked to customers—which helped her sell even more of them. She looked pleased as punch.

“That’s two erasers!” she told a buyer. “Thanks a lot!”

Meanwhile, Noela stood behind her, busily drawing battle strategies or something. “Noela here! Master here!”

Noela, Vivi, and I were participating in the tournament; we’d registered under the team name “Kirio Drugs.” Teams could have a maximum of four members, but technically, you could fly solo.

“I’m scared, Noela. How’d I get roped into this?” Vivi glanced down worriedly at the eraser in her hands.

“As humans, there are times when we must fight!” Noela said, staring into the distance as if she’d tossed off some proverb. (For the record, in terms of species, neither she nor Vivi were technically *humans*.) Honestly, I hadn’t planned to participate in the tournament, but Noela had refused to take no for an answer.

“Hey, Noela, wouldn’t you prefer just to partner with Vivi instead of adding me to the team?” I said, practically begging. “I bet you’d have more fun.”

Noela shook her head. “Master on Noela’s team! Noela make man out of Master.”

I knew she just meant that we’d win, but still, where the heck had she picked up *that* phrase? *Please don’t word it like that, Noela. You could cause a nasty misunderstanding.*

“I shall compete as well, woman,” a familiar voice declared at the registration table.

Noela, Vivi, and I turned. There stood Ejil, eraser in hand. *Wait, Ejil’s competing?! But I gave him the day off and everything!*

“What’s your team name?” Mina inquired.

“Is that not obvious? Team Demon King!”

How creative.

“List your team members, please.”

“There’s but one demon king in this world! Me!”

Seriously?

Mina didn’t take Ejil’s bait at all. “Solo it is, then.”

Man, she’s gotten really good at ignoring Ejil’s, uh, unique personality.

“I’ll be joining the fun as well, Doctor!” Ejil informed me. “Please go easy on me.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” I replied. “No magic, got it?”

“I know. Noela!”

“Groo?”

“Since I’m competing alone, I’m at quite a disadvantage. But I shall prove to you that nothing is impossible for the demon king!” Ejil struck a pose, his cape flapping dramatically. “If I win—no, if I’m in the final ten...”

Did he seriously lower the bar already? What happened to nothing being impossible? I forced a grin, waiting for Ejil’s next words.

“Go on a date with me, please!”

I figured.

“No.”

“Come on! Think about it! Top ten!”

Noela was having none of it. “Impossible.”

“Ice cold before thawing. Just as I’d expect of my beloved.” Ejil was, as usual, getting more and more optimistic about his crush. “When next we meet, Noela, it shall be on the battlefield!”

“Bring it.”

Whoa. Badass.

“Prepare yourself! Bwa ha ha ha!” With a snap of his cape, Ejil walked away.

After that, Lord Valgas dropped by with his daughter.

“Elaine, you know I’m burning the candle at both ends. Why must you force me to participate in some festival for commoners? My word, how bothersome! Nonetheless, if you insist, I suppose I have no choice.” Lord Valgas was *really* playing this up.

Elaine looked less than pleased. “I don’t recall saying I wanted to be on your team. I’d much rather spend time with Noela and Sir Reiji.”

Both father and daughter greeted Mina and began the registration process.

“Sir Reiji,” Lord Valgas acknowledged me.

“Thanks for coming by.”

“It’s nothing. Elaine was desperate to have me join the festivities.”

Lord Valgas knows I’m in on his secret, but I guess he’s rolling with this cover story.

“Good day, Sir Reiji!” Elaine said.

“Good day to you too, Elaine,” I replied. “I’m taking part in the tournament as well—my team name’s Kirio Drugs. Actually, we still have an opening. Care to join?” I felt bad that she was being forced to join her dad’s team just because he wanted to mess around.

“A-are you sure?”

“Groo!” Noela exclaimed. “Elaine friend! Join team!”

“I’m fine with Elaine joining too!” Vivi agreed.

“Then I’d be happy to join Team Kirio Drugs!”

I glanced at Mina. She smiled and nodded, adding Elaine’s name to our registration form.

“But, Sir Reiji, that means I’m all alone,” Lord Valgas protested.

“This’ll be a chance to impress Elaine, my lord. If you two were partners, that would be much tougher.”

“Th-that’s true.” Lord Valgas hesitated. “But, erm, as lord of this land, I can’t afford to embarrass myself!”

Yup, I know. Pride, social standing, all that jazz. Grow up.

Paula, having overheard the conversation, slid in. “How about this, my lord?” She offered Lord Valgas a mask that would hide everything but his eyes.

He took it. “None of my peers will recognize me in this! I shall survive this battle royale on my own!”

“Good luck, Father!”

“Thank you, dear. You too.”

“Mm-hmm!”

Mina wound up registering a lot of competitors for the tournament. Since Lord Valgas had advertised the event throughout his domain, there were tons of participants I didn’t recognize. Pretty much all Kalta’s businesses—from the general store to every last restaurant—had a booth with things for sale. The whole town was in full-blown festival mode. Paula was handling the drugstore’s sales at the moment, so festivalgoers were buying Kirio Drugs products alongside erasers.

Once fifty teams had signed up, we closed registration, and the competitors gathered in the town square.

Alf stepped forward to explain the rules. “Ahem! Participants, you’ll use these water-filled erasers to shoot members of other teams. If someone shoots *you*, you’re out!” The battlefield included the entirety of Kalta. If you left town, you were disqualified.

The festival planners had done their best to ensure the rules were fair. At first, I’d been a little concerned about participating, considering I was an organizer. But since I wasn’t exactly athletic, I hoped folks would cut me some slack.

The teams left the town square in order of registration. Once every team had gone, a bell would ring to signal the start of the tournament.

“Next...Team Kirio Drugs! Go get ready, please!” Alf called.

Noela, Vivi, Elaine, and I made our exit.

“Leave to Noela, Master!” the werewolf girl piped up. I patted my reliable

little fluffball on the head.

“I-I’m so nervous,” Vivi said with a sigh.

“I can’t believe I’m on Sir Reiji’s team!” Elaine chirped. “It’s thrilling!”

I doubted Team Kirio Drugs would last long in the tournament. Noela was exceptionally strong, but aside from me, it *was* a team of young ladies. We headed behind a house on the outskirts of town, out of the way. After we’d waited a bit, the bell rang.

“Let’s do our best!” Elaine said.

Noela, Vivi, and I responded with an energetic “Yeah!” and the tournament began.

Team Kirio Drugs’ four members were hiding together, so if another competitor came over, they’d spot us immediately. *This honestly reminds me of playing hide-and-seek as a kid*, I mused. *My heart’s racing and everything.*

“What’s the plan, Noela?” I asked.

“Groo? Victory.”

“I mean, yeah... But be more specific. Like, if we spot an enemy, should we run? Fight? What’s our strategy? I figure we should decide early on.”

“Run, of course,” Vivi piped up. “After all, this is about survival!”

I agreed with her on that one. There was no reason to take unnecessary risks. And yet, Elaine and Noela shook their heads.

“Crush enemy elegantly,” Noela said.

“I want to fight!” Elaine agreed. “Pow! Pow!”

According to the tournament rules, teams could only refill their erasers at wells. There were several wells around town, but I figured competitors would camp at those spots. Since we were on the edge of town, there were hardly any passersby. Still, we could hear the distant sound of the festivities in the town square.

“Groo?!” Noela sniffed, then hopped out from the shadows just as a competitor carrying an eraser ran by.

“H-hey, wait!” I cried.

The enemy readied their weapon. “Y-you’re on the drugstore tea—” Noela dodged the attack effortlessly, closing in with incredible speed. “Ugh! I can’t hit her!”

“Garoo!” Noela released a single shot at point-blank range, striking her target.

“Damn it! I’m...done for...” The opposing player fell to their knees and then collapsed.

I appreciated their theatrics. *You realize she only hit you with water, right?*

“Garoo!” Having defeated an opponent all by herself, Noela wagged her tail excitedly.

Was Noela’s victim alone? Looking around, I concluded that the opposing player was a solo actor. *It doesn’t seem like they were luring us out either.*

“Noela! There’re a bunch of people over there!” Elaine pointed at a group hiding in the shadows, getting closer.

Had Noela’s target been running from the group? That’d explain why our fallen enemy had no allies; their team had been finished off already.

“Noela rain fire upon enemy again!” Noela declared.

Water, actually.

Suddenly, the group she was about to attack began crying out in despair.

“What the—?!”

“Gah! From over there?!”

“You may be following the rules, but isn’t it cocky to attack a bigger team?”

“All clear!” someone cried. “I beat three of them, brother!”

Wait a sec. I know that voice.

“Five down. All clear here, Ririka!”

The elven siblings, Kururu and Ririka, had defeated the enemy group.

“It’s Team Pretty Boy and Girl!” Vivi declared.

What the heck? I guess you're technically not wrong, but...

"I know you're there, Reiji baby. Come on out."

I cautiously poked my head out from the shadows. Kururu winked at me repeatedly. *Aw, man. I've got a pest after me, all right.* Since Kururu and Ririka were elves, they were probably excellent at tracking and shooting targets.

"Vivi!"

"What's the matter, Reiji? Oh—I get it! We're running!"

"Exactly. We don't stand a chance against these two. Team Kirio Drugs will retreat while you distract them!"

"Wait! I'm just bait?! Come on!" Vivi pleaded, tugging my shirt.

"You handle Reiji, brother," I heard Ririka say. "I'll polish off Noela and the rest of their team."

"Perfect. Good luck, Ririka."

"You too."

Kururu suddenly vanished.

Wait, he's coming here to my hiding spot? Man, this sucks!

"Game on, Ririka!" Noela faced her opponent toe to toe.

"I shall fight as well!" Elaine declared. "At last, Noela and I can show off our coordinated comba—" Trying to rush out, she tripped on her own skirt and fell over.

"Hey, Elaine, you okay?"

"Everything hurts..."

I figured. I'd had a feeling that this would happen. Digging through my bag, I handed her a single potion. Meanwhile, the battle between my fluffball and the elven girl began.

"Before the hunting festival, you outshone me at archery—but not now!"



“Garroo! Won’t lose to Ririka! Noela promised! Make Master a man!”

“W-wait! Pardon me?! What’re you planning to do to him?!”

Man, I knew someone would get the wrong idea.

The two girls began their fierce fire—er, water—fight.

“I won’t let you do anything weird to Reiji!”

“Noela team win! No get in our way!”

Their battle intensified. Then Kururu suddenly appeared on the roof and fired his eraser at me. *Sploosh!*

“The time’s come to bask in the stream of my affection, Reiji baby!”

Gah! Don’t say it like that! But I didn’t have time to balk at Kururu’s one-liner. *I need to dodge!*

“Reiji!”

Smack!

Someone sent me flying. I landed on the road and looked back to see Vivi where I’d stood. She lay on the ground, eyes blank.

“V-Vivi?” I gasped. “You sacrificed yourself for me?!”

“Was I...useful...?”

“Why’d you do that?!”

“We’re friends...aren’t we...?” The strength left the lake spirit’s body.

“V-Vivi! We’re not friends! You’re my part-timer, and I’m your boss! Don’t get confused!”

Vivi rose to her feet indignantly. “Why’d you go and say that?! We *are* friends, aren’t we?”

Come on. Don’t get all serious.

“Electrifying, Reiji baby!” Kururu called, shivering. “You’re pretty naughty, using her as a body shield!”

When Kururu had fired at me, Elaine had quietly circled around to his blind

spot. Now, she was crouching in a position invisible from the roof.

“Hee hee hee! If you’re going to fall by anyone’s hands, they should be mine, Reiji ba—”

“Elaine!”

She popped up at my signal. “My aim’s steady and true!”

Pulling her eraser’s trigger, Elaine shot a water jet straight into Kururu’s side.

“H-how did you—?! I... Th-this can’t be!” Kururu touched the moist spot on his torso. He looked down at his wet hand and then collapsed atop the roof.

That’s one pest out of the tournament!

“I did it!” Elaine shrieked.

“Nice shot!” We shared a high-five.

“What? Brother?! It can’t be!” Kururu’s defeat distracted Ririka completely.

Noela pulled her eraser’s trigger, but no water came out. “Garroo?!”

Now’s our chance! I tossed Vivi’s eraser to Noela, its tank still full. “Use this, Noela! This gun belonged to our fallen comrade, Vivi!”

“Vivi...” Noela stared at the weapon quietly.

“Um, I’ve been eliminated, but I’m not dead!” Vivi complained.

“For my brother!” Ririka cried.

“For Vivi!” Noela was ahead of the elf girl by a hair.

Water splashed Ririka’s face. “Eek! It’s cold!”

“Garroo!”

“You did it, Noela!” *Phew. That was a close one.*

Elaine and Noela high-fived. I high-fived Noela too, then patted her head and treated her to a potion.

Gulp! Gulp!

I’d assumed that Team Kirio Drugs would get knocked out early. Now, however, I decided we should at least try to stick out the tournament out of

respect for the people we'd beaten.

"Vivi's out, so we're down to three," I muttered. "All right! Just as I planned."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" squealed Vivi. "You intended to use me as cannon fodder all along?!"

"What's next?" I asked Noela and Elaine.

A quiet voice came from the rooftop. "Between you and me, Reiji baby...I wouldn't advise heading to the well west of here. Some masked gentleman's teamed up with a self-proclaimed demon king. They're defeating any competitors who get close."

Needless to say, Team Kirio Drugs knew right away who Kururu was referring to.

"Ejil! Noela beat," the werewolf girl declared.

"And I shall defeat Father with my own two hands!" Elaine added.

Well, I guess that's that.

Noela, Elaine, and I made our way toward the well. Since Vivi was out, she returned to the town square. I heard the bell ringing again. *Bong! Bong!*

Rustle. Rustle. Someone tugged my shirt.

"Sound, Master!"

"Yeah. That ringing means that only half the teams are left." I had experience with this kind of competition, so it was easy to remember the rules.

"The tournament's already down to twenty-five teams?" Elaine said.

"Exactly." *I guess when you consider how many contestants we've beaten or seen beaten, that's not crazy.*

"Bwa ha ha ha!" I heard Ejil's cocky laugh. "Putting this weapon in my hands was a fatal mistake! I shall annihilate you all!"

It's been a while since I've heard him talk like a real demon king. Problem was, his deadly weapon was just a water gun.

Our team tiptoed toward the well, cautiously watching the situation from the

shadows. Reloading his weapon from the bucket at his feet, Ejil began wandering around, looking for prey.

“Only half the teams are left, young man,” said the masked gentleman—Lord Valgas—with his eraser readied. “I think it’s about time we attack.”

“Not so fast, Mask. From here on, it won’t be easy to refill our weapons. We should snatch erasers from the fallen to use as backups.”

“A wonderful idea.”

The pair hadn’t noticed our approach. *We could use this chance to launch a surprise attack on them.*

Knowing Noela, that idea wouldn’t fly. There was no way she could control herself in front of an enemy, let alone someone she *personally* wanted to take down.

The werewolf girl crouched low and zoomed toward the demon king. “Ejiil!”

“Noela?!” he blurted, completely caught off guard.

“Ejil fall here!”

“Bwa ha ha ha! Come at me!”

They’re like rival mecha pilots meeting on the battlefield.

The demon king countered Noela’s insanely nimble attack with jets of ammo. Crazy as it sounded, this was really just a water gun fight.

“Augh! Is that you, Sir Reiji? Elaine?!”

Yup, Lord Valgas noticed us. The masked gentleman held two erasers, evidently planning to put us down.

Elaine scowled. “Team Kirio Drugs won’t put up with your tyranny!”

“You heard her, my lord.”

“I’m not a lord! I’m a nameless gunslinger who, for his own reasons, must mask his identity!”

I thought Lord Valgas was wearing that mask just to avoid being embarrassed. *But he’s got a backstory and everything. Wow.*

The skirmishes elsewhere in town had apparently ended; onlookers clustered around us.

“Come and get me if you can, Sir Reiji, Elaine!”

“Shall we, Sir Reiji?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go.”

Elaine charged ahead. I provided cover fire, careful not to shoot her in the back, since she was weaving side to side.

“How impertinent! Don’t assume that you two can handle me alone!” Lord Valgas fired back at us. In spite of his overconfident warning, he was hiding behind a big barrel.

“Our attacks aren’t working, Sir Reiji!” cried Elaine, dashing back and hiding beside me. “That barrel’s in the way!”

“Despite being comic relief, your dad’s pretty tough.”

“Who are you calling comic relief?!”

Look at your mask, dude.

“Listen, Elaine,” I whispered. “I’ll pop out and draw our masked gunslinger’s attention. You shoot him while he’s distracted.”

“What about you, though?”

I offered a strained smile. “Don’t worry about me.” I’d always wanted to say something like that in a situation like this!

Meanwhile, the battle between the demon king and the fluffball was as heated as I’d predicted. Jets of water whizzed past one another, dampening the combatants’ surroundings.

“Groo! Garroo!”

“Grrrr!”

Man, Noela should just start a career as a hero or something.

“All right, Sir Reiji,” Elaine said. “I won’t let your courage go to waste!”

“Good girl! Once you beat that masked gunslinger, cover Noela, okay?”

“Of course.”

“Ha ha ha! What’s the matter? Scared?!” Lord Valgas taunted us from behind the barrel.

The bell rang again, signaling that more teams had lost. I noticed then that our audience had grown. *It’s actually possible that we’re the only two teams left. If so, I really don’t want to lose.*

“Let’s do this, Elaine.”

“Yes! Charge!” Elaine hid behind me as I hopped out from our cover.

“Using your companion as a shield will do you no good!” Lord Valgas rapidly pumped his eraser and fired at us.

I’d been thinking for a while that it took some real elbow grease to pump those things.

“Ugh!” he grunted. “Preparing the eraser is more tiresome than I expected.”

As I’d guessed, he didn’t have much stamina left. Understandable, since he probably didn’t exercise much. *This is our chance.* I circled around the right side of Lord Valgas’s barrel, and Elaine circled around the left.

“A-a pincer attack?! How impertinent!” Locking on to each of us with an eraser, Valgas tried to shoot, but barely any water came out of his guns.

No ammo left.

“We strike now!” I shouted.

“Right!” Elaine called back.

We showered Lord Valgas with water jets from either side. He fell to the ground, his mask falling off.

“That face! Wait... It can’t be! Father?!”

Er, you totally knew that, Elaine. Drop the act.

“Elaine...you’ve gotten so strong.”

Elaine cradled Lord Valgas’s body. “It really *is* you, Father!”

Um...guys?

“I didn’t think you’d give this tournament your all if you recognized me,” Lord Valgas gasped. “So I wore this mask.”

Wasn’t that mask supposed to keep you from embarrassing yourself?

“I can’t believe it,” Elaine murmured.

Valgas coughed. “You’re...already a lady, my daughter.” He slowly closed his eyes.

“F-Father?! Father!” The young noblewoman embraced her father’s (dead?) body.

The onlookers sniffled, using handkerchiefs to wipe away their tears. *Was this little show really that moving?!*

“Groo! Pervert King! You’re mine! Arrooooo!” Noela stood triumphantly over Ejil, who was slumped over headfirst, butt in the air.

“Urgh... How? How could I lose?!” Ejil gazed up at her, humiliated.

“Those who fight driven by rage and hate are fools. The ability to transform joy, happiness, and hope into strength is part of what makes humanity powerful. You underestimated that ability, and therefore you lost.” Noela delivered her victory speech with great eloquence.

She totally just wanted to tell him that, didn’t she?

The bell rang and rang, signaling the tournament’s end.

“And the winning team is...Kirio Drugs!”

Once everyone had made it back to the town square, Vivi, Noela, Elaine, and I were crowned the tournament’s victors. That said, there was no prize aside from bragging rights as winners of the first-ever Kalta Battle Royale Festival.

“My palms were so sweaty at the end!” Vivi said excitedly. “You were awesome, Noela!”

Noela smirked, reveling in her victory. “Garroo!”

After finishing up at the festival headquarters, Mina came over. “Good work, everyone! How was it, Mr. Reiji?”

“Pretty fun, all things considered.”

“Noela join next time too, Master!”

“I’d like to participate again as well!” Elaine agreed.

I nodded. “Sounds good to me. The three of us, back in action!”

“Don’t forget me, Reiji!” Vivi cried. “We’re a team of four! If I hadn’t protected you, you would’ve been dead meat!”

“I was just kidding, Vivi,” I said, attempting to calm the lake spirit.

As we’d anticipated, awareness of the erasers quickly spread thanks to the Kalta Battle Royale Festival. Paula sold the firearms at her tool shop, and she was crazy busy for a while.

The drugstore sold erasers in a set with extinguisher fluid. After the tournament, though, people seemed to see them more as toy weapons than emergency tools. They had a reputation as playthings that also happened to be able to put out fires.

The erasers were strictly supposed to be for fire prevention! Oh well.

Chapter 4:

Smooth Water

AS EJIL AND I worked in the lab, Noela flung open the door and rushed in.

“What’s up?” I asked. “I just gave you your potion.”

“Not want potion, Master. Stomach hurt!”

Did she eat something weird again? “I’ve got a bottle of stomach medicine here. Have you had any?”

“No.”

“Then drink this.” I handed her the bottle.

“Uh-huh.”

Noela’s normally perky ears drooped sadly. *That’s all the proof I need that she’s not feeling great.* The werewolf girl was easy to read.

“Let’s see...” I looked around. “Any more stomach medicine, I’ll need to get from the backsto—”

A searing pain in my gut caused me to stop mid-sentence. *Gah! My stomach’s killing me! What the hell? Do I have food poisoning?!* I hadn’t eaten the breakfast Mina served today; I’d pretty much just had water.

Ejil spoke up. “Doctor, we’re out of stomach med—” He, too, stopped short upon seeing me curled in a ball like a newborn goat. The demon king stared at me, wide-eyed. “Er, is something wrong?”

Give me a chance to explain myself! This position at least gives me a bit of relief. “M-my stomach’s killing me.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Uh...yeah, probably. Ejil, could you grab some stomach meds from the backstock?”

“Well, as I was saying, we’re all out. Noela just drank the last of them.”

“C-come on. You’ve got to be kidding. We had twenty bottles in stock yesterday.”

“The wretched humans came and bought them all.”

Wait. Does that mean Noela and I aren’t the only ones suffering from stomach cramps?

“I need to figure out what’s going on,” I mumbled. *But first...bathroom.*

I mixed a fresh batch of stomach medicine. Since we’d sold out, it was clear that other townsfolk were also struggling with nausea. The only explanation was a water supply problem.

Vivi swung by the next day; I explained the situation, and she inspected the drugstore’s water life stone. That life stone was one of this world’s unique and incredibly useful items; it produced our cooking and drinking water. Vivi touched the flowing liquid, sniffed it, and even tasted it.

“Well? What’s the deal?”

“It seems like something poisonous might’ve found its way into the water supply.”

She can tell? “All hail the drugstore’s water fairy!” I cried. “You’re amazing!”

“I’m a lake spirit, not a water fairy! How many times are you going to get that wrong?” Vivi pouted. “I can’t genuinely take a compliment like that.”

I shrugged it off and said, “Poison, huh?”

“Don’t worry. It’s pretty weak. Your body can’t absorb it, so it’ll probably purge itself of the stuff.”

“I see.” *Water poisoning it is, then. And if more than just two of us have gotten sick...*

Only one place in Kalta sold fire, wind, and water life stones.

I entered the tool shop only to find that nobody was at the counter. “Hey! You in, Paula?”

“Not right now!” I just barely heard her voice coming from the back. “I’m doing big business! The *biggest* business!”

She’s definitely in the bathroom. Talk about bad timing. “Spare me the deets.”

I waited about ten minutes, and Paula emerged with a dejected expression.

“Upset stomach?”

“Yuppers. Man, you’ve got no tact, asking a lady that.” Paula smiled, but she lacked her usual energy.

I explained Vivi’s investigation to the tool shop owner.

“So, my water life stone’s to blame for that ‘big business’?” she said.

“Apparently. Has anything weird happened around here?”

“Not that I can think of.”

Since life stones were magical, Paula told me that merchants and adventurers—mostly the former—often came by the tool shop to sell them. There was no way to tell who she’d purchased these particular life stones from.

“You’re saying I bought defective life stones and sold them off?” Paula frowned. “Urgh. I feel terrible.”

“Aside from making a plan to ensure this doesn’t happen again, what should we do now?” I asked her.

“Well, if you mass-produced stomach meds, they’d fly off the shelves. But it’d be awful if people pointed fingers and said we planned this together.”

“Right.” Paula loved making money, but she wasn’t the type who’d ever intentionally cause other people trouble like this. “For the time being, I think we’ll have to sterilize our water.”

“That’ll be a hassle.”

“It’s not like we have other options.”

Paula grimaced. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

I get it. Up until now, our water had been perfectly potable—but now we’d need to boil it. That was an extra step where there hadn’t been one. “I guess I’ll

have to make a purifier.”

“Good luck, Rei Rei.” Paula showed no sign of wanting to help. “If you do create something, hand it out to your customers for free. I’ll pay you back for it all.”

I guess she does feel responsible for all this. “Sure thing.”

Leaving the tool shop, I headed to my lab.

Back on Earth, plenty of people in Japan and other developed nations took safe, clean drinking water for granted. But many places still lacked potable water, and my next creation was the kind of thing they would’ve relied on.

Water Purifier: Eliminates aquatic viruses and bacteria that harm the human body.

Done. I headed to the kitchen, drawing water from the life stone to test the purifier.

Filling a bucket, I heard a voice behind me. “What’d you make this time, Mr. Reiji?”

“The water life stones around Kalta are doing a number on the townsfolk,” I replied. “So I made a product to eliminate the nasty bacteria in the water.”

“Ah!” Mina clapped her hands. “Does this have to do with Noela’s awful stomachache?”

“Yup. I had one too.”

“I just assumed she’d eaten something odd again.”

I didn’t blame her, considering Noela’s track record. “Nope. Vivi checked our water for me. She figured out that it’s contaminated.”

I poured some purifier into the bucket of water. *Kerploosh!* A ripple ran across the surface and vanished. I stirred the contents just to be safe, then took a cupful of water and sipped it.

“Huh? It tastes pretty good.”

I wasn't an expert on water flavor, but the water in the bucket definitely tasted better than before. The mouthfeel was hard to describe.

"Really? May I try some?" I handed Mina the cup, and she took a sip. "Ooh, you're right! This is so much better!"

Noela must've heard us because she poked her head into the kitchen. "What happen, Master?"

"Come give this a sip, Noela."

When she realized the cup only held water, Noela looked indifferent, but she took it nonetheless. Sniffing the water cautiously, like a dog, she lapped at its surface.

"Garoo?" *Lick. Lick. Gulp!* "Smooth. Yummy." Noela peered down at the empty cup, eyes sparkling. "Make tasty potion, Master! Research!"

"What? Oh. You're right, I could use this water..."

"Arroo! In potion! Yeah?"

The drugstore products I'd made with life stone water hadn't caused any stomachaches yet, but I decided this might be the right time to dump them all out and remake them with purified water.

After that, I gave water purifier to townsfolk who dropped by with stomach pain, and the product's popularity exploded throughout Kalta. It became famous not for purifying water but for making it smooth and delicious.

For the record, I also tried making potions with purified water. Our resident potion sommelier, the fluffball, sampled them. Apparently, she couldn't tell the old and new potions apart.

"Tasty taste!" she exclaimed—her usual reaction.

Chapter 5:

Kirio Drugs' Day Off

AROUND CLOSING TIME, I said, "How about we all go somewhere on our day off tomorrow?" Vivi and Ejil were working today, so it was a perfect time to pitch the idea.

"That sounds lovely," Mina told me, smiling. "Yes, let's go!"

Vivi raised her hand cautiously. "C-can I come?"

"Of course. I said we'd all go."

"M-may I join you as well?!" Ejil said.

"Yes. I said *all*."

"Doctor!" The demon king jumped at me, delighted.

I grabbed his face to keep him from getting closer. "So, where do you guys want to go? We should probably make it a one-day trip, since the drugstore will be open the day after."

Vivi raised her hand. "Reiji! Me! Me!"

"You have the floor, part-timer."

"Let's go have a picnic at the lake!"

Eh, we'd done that before. The lake was where we first met Vivi.

"Doctor, I... I'll go anywhere you wish to go!" Ejil interjected.

He doesn't have a particular spot in mind. Meh, I guess if Noela's there, he'll be happy.

Hearing our conversation, the werewolf girl entered the drugstore holding an eraser. "Forest survival trip!" she demanded.

She's rarin' to go. Still, an eraser wasn't really survival gear. "Absolutely not. Why would we subject ourselves to that? No hard work."

"Groo..." The werewolf girl looked displeased.

“How about a hike, Mr. Reiji?” Mina suggested. “We wouldn’t need to climb a mountain—we could hike up a hill near town. That shouldn’t be too tiring if Griffy carries our bags.”

“Why do you insist on aggravating the good doctor, woman?!” As usual, Ejil was especially rude to Mina.

A hike, huh? “I like that plan,” I told her. “Let’s do it.”

Ejil flipped like a damn pancake. “Absolutely! Let’s go hiking!”

Mina clapped her hands happily as we settled on her idea. “Afterward, we can have a picnic as we enjoy the view!”

Sounds like a delightful little outdoor adventure.

Noela seemed concerned, though. “Lot of bugs?”

Right—I forgot. She can’t handle creepy-crawlies.

“Yeah, there probably will be a decent number of bugs,” I admitted.

“Garoo! Hate.”

For Noela to be comfortable spending time outdoors, we’d need a special product. I could think of some items in the drugstore that might do the trick, but nothing that would also allow *her* to get off scot-free.

“No worries, Noela. I’ll make something that’ll get rid of bugs on this hike,” I assured her.

“Garoo! Master wonderful! All hail Master!” She hugged my waist, and I stroked her little head.

Ejil stared at me, fuming with jealousy, then retrieved a map from behind the counter and opened it. “If we plan to return on the same day, Doctor, I’d say Mt. Bizef looks like a good hiking route.”

According to Ejil, Mt. Bizef was about four hundred meters tall—pretty small for a mountain. I had to hand it to our demon king; naturally, he was familiar with the area.

“There are no taller peaks near Kalta,” he concluded. “I imagine that the view from the top is quite nice.”

I swear, Ejil's way better suited to being someone's right-hand man than to being demon king.

"W-will I be all right?" Vivi asked nervously.

"You shouldn't have trouble," Ejil assured her. "Mt. Bizef is known for its springs."

"Wonderful!"

With no better options for our trip on the table, we settled on Mt. Bizef. The part-time team, Vivi and Ejil, headed home. Meanwhile, Mina and Noela prepared food for the hike.

Time to make a new product for tomorrow. I headed to the lab.

"I'll use repellent as a base." Grabbing a bottle of repellent from our backstock, I mixed in various ingredients. "There. Done."

Bye-Bye Bug Queen: Insect repellent so strong, bugs won't come anywhere near.

Noela should be able to enjoy herself bug-free with this.

The werewolf girl poked her head in. "Made food, Master."

"Hey, fluffball. No need to worry about bugs anymore."

"Groo?"

To test the repellent, I grabbed some bug gel—the exact same product I'd used to lure food for Griffy—and headed outside.

"What that, Master?"

"A product to keep bugs away."

"Arroo! For Noela?"

"Yup, for you." I slathered some gel on a rock and, just like that, lured over tons of bugs.

"Garoo!" Noela quickly hid in the shadows.

“Now we take the lid off.”

A unique smell wafted from the bottle of Bye-Bye Bug Queen; when insects drew near it, they immediately fled.

“Wards off bugs, Master!” Noela seemed fascinated. I handed her the bottle, and she gave it a sniff. “Weird smell, but no problem.”

“Normal repellent works on you as well as monsters and insects. I designed *this* one specifically for bugs, so you and Griffy should be fine with it. Now you can enjoy the hike.”

Noela’s tail wagged. “Thank you, Master! Noela let you touch tail!”

Since she’d given me permission, I made the most of her tail’s soft fur.

As I slept, I heard a quiet voice in my ear. “Good morning, Doctor.”

“Gah! Wh-who is that?!”

“It’s me, Doctor. Your number-one disciple!”

I don’t recall ever making you my disciple!

“What time is it?” Still in bed, I looked outside to see the sun just peeking over the horizon. “What’re you doing in here, Ejil?”

“What a silly question! You said I could come on the day trip.”

“You mean, join the hike?” I rubbed my eyes, yawning. “Sure, but do you realize what time it is?”

“Am I ill, Doctor?” Ejil asked suddenly.

“Er...what makes you ask? The fact that you’re acting stupid?”

“You’re certainly mean-spirited in the morning,” Ejil said. “I’m asking because, for some reason, I couldn’t sleep when I thought about today.”

I scratched my head, letting out another yawn. I would’ve been lying if I said I wasn’t excited too, but I wasn’t so eager that I couldn’t sleep.

He’s like an elementary schooler before a field trip. Oh, right...he’s never been on a field trip. The demon king hadn’t had the same experiences I’d had as a

modern dude.

“Don’t worry, Ejil. You aren’t sick,” I assured him. “Of course you can’t sleep the night before this big trip. You’re the type who can’t even nod off when you think about the candy you’ll buy with your three hundred yen the next day.”

“Candy? Three hundred yen?” Obviously, no one from this world would’ve understood my super-specific example.

I was now wide awake, thanks to Ejil. When I headed to the kitchen to grab a glass of water, I was surprised to hear noise coming from within.

“Ah, Mr. Reiji! Ejil! Good morning.” Mina was already packing for today’s hike.

“It’s way too early, Mina.”

She just giggled teasingly. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Since Kalta didn’t have schools, this hike was Mina’s first “field trip” too.
Which obviously means the same thing goes for the werewolf and lake spirit.

“Tea set... Plates...” Mina stuffed tableware into a huge bag.

I know Griffy will carry all this, but there’s so much.

“Ejil, do you think it’ll be hard to boil water on Mt. Bizef?” Mina inquired.

“Probably not, but will the equipment fit in your bag?”

“Hmm... Let’s pass on boiling water for this trip. It’ll get cold, but I’ll bring some tea in a flask.”

Man... Drinking hot tea with a great view would be pretty ritzy. Hmm.

Ejil cleared his throat. “Allow me to assist you, woman.”

“Thank you so much. Would you mind—”

The demon king followed Mina’s instructions as he helped her. Despite being a king, he was actually quite a handyman—super useful no matter what we were doing.

We still had tons of time before we’d leave, so I decided to try making a new product I’d just thought of. On my way to the lab, I heard voices.

“What am I going to do, Noela? I couldn’t sleep!”

“Quiet, Vivi! Noela no sleep either.”

Vivi had slept in Noela’s room last night. Apparently, neither girl was able to rest. Even Griffy was making noise outside, perhaps having noticed that today was no normal day off. *Jeez, the sun’s not even up, and we’re all awake already.*

“Maybe we should leave a little early,” I mumbled.

Closing the lab door, I gathered materials for the hike, grabbing the Bye-Bye Bug Queen I’d made yesterday and some Translator DX so we could communicate with Griffy. I almost got a bottle of repellent but then realized we wouldn’t need it with the demon king present.

I also packed some of the usual potions and stomach meds, just in case. Then I got to work, quickly creating a brand-new product.

“With this, we should be able to really enjoy our food,” I said. I couldn’t wait to see everyone’s surprised faces.

After I finished, I led Griffy out from its stable. The griffin flapped its wings excitedly. “Kyu! Kyu!”

I took a swig of Translator DX to hear what Griffy was saying. “Everyone’s here! Where’re you going? Will Griff get to go too?!”

“No need to fret. Actually, we need your help with something only you can do.”

“Yay! Griff loves being useful!”

Aww. How cute. The corners of my eyes crinkled like an affectionate old geezer’s as I ruffled Griffy’s chest plumage. *Hey, being a griffin and all, couldn’t Griffy fly us to the foot of Mt. Bizef?*

“Could five people fit on your back, Griffy?”

“Five?” Griffy repeated. “Hmm...yes, as long as they aren’t too big!”

The drugstore staff should fit fine, then. Now we can cut down our travel time.

I noticed Noela staring at us from the window. “Only fluff Noela, Master!”

Griffy hesitated, then hurried away from me, flustered. “You mustn’t pet Griff’s feathers like that, Master! After all, you have Instructor Fluffball!”

Griffy's calling her "Instructor" again.

Mina stepped out of the house carrying a huge backpack. Vivi, Noela, and Ejil followed her.

"Oh, my!" Mina exclaimed. "Everyone's here."

"Perfect. How about we get going, then?" I suggested. We could eat the breakfast sandwiches Mina had made en route.

I hopped on Griffy's back, and Noela got on in front of me. Ejil, Vivi, and Mina climbed up behind us.

"We're good to go, Griffy!" I cried. "Lift off!"

"You bet!"

Griffy broke into a gallop, flapping its wings. *Ker-thump! Ker-thump!* Then, the griffin took off. Ejil was totally used to flying, but the rest of us couldn't help shrieking excitedly.

"How long will it take to reach the foot of Mt. Bizef, Ejil?" I asked.

"About an hour, normally. Like this, though? Ten minutes, give or take."

"Hey! Hey, Reiji! Let's ride Li'l Kyuu all the way to the peak!" Vivi cried.

I'd just been considering that, but Mina interrupted. "Perish the thought! Hiking is fun *because* you climb with your own two feet!"

"Right," I agreed.

Shortly after that, we arrived at Mt. Bizef. The weather was clear; it was a perfect hiking day. We found a large tree with an enormous shadow, and once Mina spread a blanket on the ground, we ate our breakfast sandwiches right there in the shade. The lettuce, cheese, and crunchy bacon were delicious.

Noela's fluffy tail wagged back and forth; she seemed happy as a clam. *She's so obvious.*

"Did you bring any tea, Mina?" I asked.

"Of course. Just a moment."

"Actually, could you give me the whole pot?"

Mina looked perplexed, but she did as I asked. Since we'd flown from the drugstore to Mt. Bizef, the tea was already pretty cold. I poured it into a bottle I pulled from my bag.

"What're you doing, Doctor?" Ejil asked.

"Warming the tea up, of course."

I put the sealed bottle of tea inside a watertight leather pouch, then added my new product and some water. Vapor rose from the drawstring pouch's opening with a whooshing noise.

"Master, white," Noela pointed out.

"Yup. That's steam."

Looking at me and the leather pouch, Vivi apparently realized what the new product was. "Hold on, Reiji!"

"Yeah?"

"You're smoking the tea, aren't you?!"

"Wrong." She totally didn't understand.—

Hot-Hotter-Hottest: Instant heating agent. Mix with water to produce high-temperature steam capable of warming objects.

When the steam in the leather pouch really started to build, I pulled out the toasty-warm tea bottle with potholders.

"A-amazing!" cried Vivi. "It's nice and hot!"

"With this new product, we won't need to eat cold food when we're out of town," I explained.

Noela touched the leather pouch and then jerked her hand back from the heat. "Groo?!"

Mina handed out cups and poured in the tea. Between that and the sandwiches she'd made, we had a surprisingly nice breakfast. Once we finished

our refreshments, it was time to head out hiking.

Noela switched to her wolf form; she said it was easier to climb mountain paths as a wolf. *I guess two legs aren't the best for mountain climbing.* She sniffed around to confirm that there were no beasts or monsters nearby. Since we were using the Bye-Bye Bug Queen, we didn't spot a single insect either. The rest of us took some Translator DX so we could understand what she was saying.

"This way!" Noela called. "No problem! Come!"

"Your fur's so smooth, Instructor," cried Griffy. "Griff's jealous!"

"Noela bathe every day, of course!" Noela snorted.

Ejil seemed unusually moved by her wolf form. "Noela looks positively divine. She's truly a mountain goddess!"

"Oh, right," I said. "This is your first time seeing her like this."

Noela's tail wagged. Thunderstruck, Ejil began to tremble.

"What's up?"

"How could she wag her tail in front of me? How salacious!"

You're the only one who feels that way.

No longer able to hold back, Ejil leapt at the wolf. "Noela!"

"Garroo!" Turning to face him, she caught his head in her mouth.

"Agh... Ooooooh!" Rather than screaming in pain, Ejil moaned as if he were getting a wonderful massage.

"Master, Ejil beyond saving. Noela eat head," Noela told me.

"Please don't."

"Ejil's so disgusting!" Griffy kicked the demon king's body as it dangled from Noela's teeth.

"Come on, stop it! No ganging up on Ejil!"

He was the demon king and all, but when it came to Kirio Drugs' employees, Ejil was as talented and good at his job as Mina. I couldn't have him die on me.

Noela spat Ejil out, and his grinning body flopped to the ground.

“Should we leave him be?” asked Vivi. “I mean, it looks like he’s still enjoying himself.”

“Sounds good,” Mina smiled.

Meh. It’s not like Ejil will be in real danger here. He is the demon king.

At any rate, I had stuff I wanted to do on this hike, so I wasn’t going to waste time over Ejil.

As we hiked along the trail, I made sure to harvest as many unfamiliar herbs, nuts, and flowers as I could. *Fwip. Fwip.*

Vivi seemed puzzled. “What’re you doing, Reiji? Writing a guidebook on plants or something?”

“Nah. I can use these to make new products.”

“I’ll help you pick them, then!”

“Much obliged. Grab the same stuff I’m grabbing, okay?”

“Uh-huh! No problem!”

Mt. Bizef was only a ten-minute ride from Kalta on Griffy’s back, but with the stuff I was foraging, I’d be able to make way more products. *If I can grow any of these in our meadow, I totally will.*

“Reiji! Reiji! Look! I got a bunch!” Vivi cried happily, showing me what she’d collected.

Man, she’s quick!

I looked inside Vivi’s leather bag and saw that she’d picked tons of colorful mushrooms—the kind that might increase someone’s size for a while. You know what I mean.

Amyuudake Mushroom: Fungus that produces an ominous first impression. Causes diarrhea, vomiting, and visual/auditory hallucinations.

“Vivi, dear, why did you grab these?” I asked with a grandfatherly expression. It wouldn’t be right to get mad immediately.

“They’re pretty! This way, your new products will be nice and colorful!”

“So I can make colorful potions?! Thanks a lot for *that!*” I hurled the bag away, wide-eyed.

“Aw! What’s the big idea?!”

“That’s my line, you airhead!” I gave her empty head a light smack. “Didn’t I tell you to pick what I was picking?”

“Yeowch! I just thought I could be more useful by—”

“I’m docking your salary.”

“I’m sorry!” It had only taken a second to put an end to Vivi’s excuses.

My personal rule was not to create any products meant to hurt people. If anything I made harmed the body, it’d be a temporary side effect at most. I *had* created products that were harmful if used incorrectly, but still, you get my point.

“Tee hee!” Mina giggled warmly as she watched my back-and-forth with Vivi.

After that, Mina wound up filling in for Vivi, helping me harvest quite a few new plants.

“You’re a lifesaver, Mina.”

“It’s no problem. This is a lot of fun! I never get to come when you gather new herbs.”

That’s a good point. Since Mina was great at housework and managing the drugstore, she always focused on those chores. I sometimes asked her to help in the garden, but having her come harvest new herbs and stuff always felt like a bit much. Usually, Noela was the best person to bring, since she had her own built-in enemy radar.

After hiking for a while, we squeezed in a break.

Vivi was starting to fall apart. “Reiji, I can’t walk any further!”

I helped her onto Griffy’s back. “You lack stamina, Miss Lake Spirit.”

“I’m not a spirit, I’m a fairy! Wait—no, I *am* a spirit!” She’d totally taken the bait.

About two hours after we’d started climbing, we finally reached the peak. None of us were avid hikers, so we were exhausted. Upon our arrival, Mina and Vivi plopped down on some boulders nearby.

Noela returned to her human form. “Garoo! Amazing view!” She tugged on my shirt, pointing.

Past her finger was the wide-open land—fields seemingly the size of a fingertip, roads like thin threads, people the size of ants traveling along them.

“Whoa!” I gasped. “Spectacular.”

Vivi and Mina reacted similarly. The cold breeze felt fantastic on our warm, tired cheeks. I looked down, seeing the path we’d traveled to reach this peak, and we silently drank in the grandeur until Noela’s stomach rumbled.

That sounded more like a laser gun, to be honest.

“Hungry, Master!”

“Should we get ready for lunch, then?”

We opened a picnic blanket in a spot that looked cozy, and Mina started pulling stuff out of her huge backpack.

“Firewood, a frying pan, eggs, bacon...” She paused. “Erm, do you think a life stone will make a big enough fire?”

“I figured that might be an issue, so I brought some hell flame.” I rummaged through my bag. Hell flame was perfect for outdoor cooking.

“Then we won’t have trouble keeping a big fire going!” Mina said, relieved. She was absolutely right, but her glowing description sounded like a TV sales pitch.

Meanwhile, Vivi was on the verge of tears. “Reiji, the water’s filthy!”

“Didn’t you bring some from upstream? That water was good, right?”

We’d found a spring on our way up the mountain, so we’d taken a break there, and Vivi had refilled our water bottles. At least, that was what she

should've done.

“Well, um...something happened. Yeah.” The lake spirit in charge of our water looked away.

She forgot to refill the bottles, didn't she?

Even Mina was flustered about running out of water. “We’ve only got a little tea left! What should we do?”

“I brought some water purifier just in case. Let’s use that,” I replied.

Noela reacted to the words “water purifier” right away. “Tasty! Smooth!”

I added some purifier to the water from the peak. “We should be able to drink this now, even if it’s a little dirty.”

“Thanks, Reiji.”

We’d made Mina a “stove” immediately, and she began cooking, boiling pasta in a pot she’d brought while simmering bacon in some kind of sauce. She added egg yolk, then grated some cheese and sprinkled it in. Noela impatiently thumped her tail on the ground.

“It’s all ready!” Mina exclaimed. “Simple mountaintop carbonara!”



She called the meal “simple,” but it was the same quality she would’ve made at home. *No wonder she brought so much stuff.* As I smirked, Noela grabbed her fork and dug in; I did the same just afterward.

“Eating outside makes it twice as tasty as usual,” I told Mina.

“I’m glad!”

“Mina! Seconds!”

“There are no second helpings today, Noela.”

“Groo?!”

Mina had brought bread too; we ate it alongside the pasta, pulling it apart and dipping it in the leftover sauce. We quickly ran out of food, and Mina used the hot-hotter-hottest to reheat some tea. She’d even brought cookies to go along with it.

“This is literally perfect,” I said.

“Tee hee! I just thought it’d all go together well.”

Noela quietly scarfed down her cookies like a squirrel. She really didn’t care how she came off.

“I’ve never had this much fun in my entire life,” Mina told me.

“Jeez. That’s heavy,” I replied sympathetically.

“Reiji!” Vivi interjected. “Feel bad for *me*!”

Why would you want me to feel bad for you?!

We enjoyed chitchatting, then traveled back down the mountain before it got too dark.

“We should do this again sometime, Mr. Reiji,” Mina suggested.

“Definitely.”

“Mina make seconds next time,” Noela demanded.

Mina giggled. “All right, all right!”

“Reiji, next time, I’ll harvest even more mushrooms!”

“Don’t worry about it, Vivi. You don’t need to do anything.”

“Don’t say that! Don’t write me off!”

And so our fun day trip came to an end.

Chapter 6:

A Stressful Misspelling

I'D BEEN SO BUSY with the tournament, hike, and personal business that I hadn't seen Zeral in a while. Today, he showed up at the drugstore with a downcast expression.

"Hey. Why the long face?" I asked. "You look like you're dying."

"I thought I'd say my goodbyes," Zeral replied.

Excuse me? "What, are you transferring to a different school?"

"Transferring...?"

Right, those jokes don't work here. "Never mind. So, what's the deal? Going out of town on vacation?"

"I guess you could say that. Y'know, I do think I'll go somewhere nice. I've done my best in this world." As always, he dragged the chair for regulars over and sat down in front of me. "Know how you just said I look like I'm dying? That's because I actually am."

"If you want me to cure a terminal illness or something, could you not set the bar too high?" I said nervously. "I'd need time to prep."

"Wait, if I *did* ask you to create a treatment like that, you would?"

"Well, er...we're friends, after all."

"Reiji, buddy!" Zeral tried to hug me.

I pushed his face away with my palm. "Quit it, creep."

"Don't be so aloof! Once I'm gone, you'll regret acting like that. You'll see. You'll say, 'Oh, how I wish I was kinder to him when I had the chance!'"

Hold on. I thought he was just messing around, but he's acting super serious. This is actually starting to sound dire.

Zeral teared up, baiting me to ask what was wrong.

Fine, I'll bite. "What's up? I'll help if I can."

“Reiji, buddy!”

“Too close! Too close!” I shoved his face with as much power as I could muster.

“It all started three days ago,” Zeral began.

Here he goes.

“I made a written oath,” he continued. “You get where I’m going with this, right?”

Nope.

“Yeah. An oath never to speak to another woman outside my family for all eternity. My beloved Feris forced me to.”

Yikes. Talk about a ball and chain. Jealous as I was that the guy had a girlfriend, I’d never envied their relationship in the slightest. “I get it. You broke the oath, right?”

“Like hell! I never break a promise, Reiji, pal.”

“No? Either way, the oath itself is crazy.”

“Let me get back to my story. So, I wound up writing an oath never to talk to another woman. It began, ‘I hereby pledge to Faris.’ To *Faris*.”

Why’d he say it twice?

“Look.” Zeral pulled a roll of parchment from his belt. He opened it, revealing a document that really did swear utter loyalty to his controlling girlfriend.

Yup. There it is: “I hereby pledge to Faris.”

“What’s your point?”

“Pal, you’re missing something.”

“And what would that be?”

Zeral jabbed his finger at the line and read it again. “‘I hereby pledge to Faris.’”

Wait...Faris? Her name’s Feris. “The name’s wrong!” I blurted as it dawned on me.

Zeral sighed. “I made an awful mistake.”

If he showed Feris the oath, she’d freak out over this “Faris” person, leading to Zeral’s untimely demise and subsequent journey to the afterlife.

“Can’t you just rewrite it?”

“This was all the parchment I had left.”

“You’re rich! Buy more!”

“I don’t have time! She’s coming by for the oath today!” Zeral screeched to the heavens, beginning to sob. He was a nervous wreck.

Parchment, huh? I’d only ever seen Lord Valgas use the stuff; I’d never spotted it in any of the shops around town. It just wasn’t something commoners needed or had access to. I wrote things down at the drugstore, sure, but always on scraps of cloth and stuff. Important documents like oaths and letters apparently required parchment, though.

“I had five sheets originally,” Zeral added. “But I messed the other ones up already.”

“How many mistakes did you make?!”

It was clear at a glance that each line of Zeral’s oath was pretty long. Every sentence reiterated his eternal love for Feris and his promise to ignore other women.

You’re more likely to make a mistake writing a long line, I reflected. And Zeral had screwed up Feris’s name. There was no walking that back.

“That leads me to now.” Zeral stood, slouching sadly. “Reiji, buddy, thanks for everything.”

“Hold your horses!” I exclaimed, eliciting a puzzled look from the guy. “Just wait.”

At first, I assumed we could scratch out Zeral’s misspelling with a knife or needle. This was an “official” document, though, so that’d look bad. Still, there was a specific product nobody in this world would be familiar with. Even if they were, they’d have no clue it’d been used after the fact, so it could definitely fool someone.

I headed into the lab, where Noela and Mina had been listening to Zeral's story quietly.

"Master, Noela help," the werewolf girl offered immediately.

"I'd like to help too," Mina said. "I'd hate for one of your precious few close friends to pass away!"

Don't say it like that, Mina! It's humiliating. "Thanks, ladies. I'll take you up on that."

"Groo!"

"Great!"

Giving the girls instructions, I went ahead and created the new product. Once I'd poured the ingredients into a bottle, the mixture glowed predictably.

Delete Fluid: Reverts paper to its original blank form. Spread fluid on ink to erase it. Fast-acting and quick-drying.

With this Delete Fluid, we should be able to touch up Zeral's oath.

"What this, Master?"

"Well..."

Looking around, I found a note I'd stuck on a shelf. I pulled it down and brushed some Delete Fluid on it; the writing began to vanish.

"Arroo! Disappear?"

"The ink's completely gone!" Mina exclaimed.

"That's what this stuff does."

It was evident from Noela and Mina's tilted heads that neither girl understood how I'd apply the product.

I headed back into the drugstore. "Hey, Zeral. If you use this stuff, you should be fine!"

I brushed some Delete Fluid on his oath right away. The transparent liquid

was the exact same color as the parchment; even if you knew it'd been used, it was incredibly tough to spot. Someone unfamiliar with the product would never notice which lines had changed.

Zeral gasped. "Th-the misspellings are gone!"

"Yup. Now you can just rewrite the spots where you messed up."

"Thanks so much, Reiji, pal!"

"I told you, that's too close!"

I scuttled away from Zeral and then got him a quill pen with some ink. It didn't take him long to correct his mistakes. "I did it! So much for dying!"

Congrats, bud.

As Noela and Mina quietly watched Zeral celebrate his new lease on life, I sensed a dark presence at the drugstore door.

"Would you like some tea, Mr. Zeral?" Mina offered.

Uh, Mina, now's a bad time! I quickly covered the girls' mouths.

"M-Miphter Reiji?" Mina asked from behind my hand.

"Groo?"

"Thanks, Mina! I'd love some!" Zeral chuckled, his face relaxed.

He was unaware of the foreboding aura that emanated from Feris, who now stood right behind him. "I heard you were at the drugstore, so I came by to check on you," she said, her bloodshot eyes staring at Zeral from behind. "What are you doing, my love?"

"Eek..." Zeral breathed.

I slid the hands covering Mina and Noela's mouths over their eyes instead. *These two aren't ready for R-rated horror.*

"You seem to be having a good time," Feris continued.

"Eyaaaugh!"

Smiling and bidding us a gracious goodbye, Feris dragged the soulless husk of Zeral out of the drugstore by his collar.

I wiped sweat from my face with my sleeve. *I guess his untimely death was inevitable. Well, I'm glad the girls didn't get caught up in it.*

As I lifted my hands from their eyes, they questioned me immediately.

"What was that for, Mr. Reiji?"

"What happen, Master?"

"Something tragic," I replied, gazing blankly into the distance like a hard-boiled film-noir detective. *Yeah...tragic. Good luck in your next life, Zeral.*

A few days later, Zeral reappeared at the drugstore with palm marks on both cheeks. He silently bought a single potion.

Stay strong, buddy.

Chapter 7:

The Greenhorn Monster Tamer

I WENT TO FEED Griffy one morning only to find a young girl in the stable, petting our griffin. I hadn't seen this girl much around Kalta. She wore shorts and a beret; I guessed that she was in her mid-teens, like Mina.

"Kyu!" Griffy seemed to appreciate the attention; it wore a serene expression.

"Aren't you the sweetest?" Noticing me, the girl quietly nodded and asked, "Are you this griffin's owner?"

"Yup. Griffy's quite a softie, huh?"

"It's really rare for griffins to get so tame," she replied. "This is my first time touching one."

I put the food Mina had made Griffy at its feet, and it started eating.

"My name's Reiji," I said. "I run that pharmacy over there. And, like I said, I own this little griffin."

"I'm Eva, an adventurer and monster tamer."

Monster tamer? Whoa. No wonder she's comfortable with Griffy. I glanced around the stable, but I didn't see anything resembling a monster tamer's familiar.

"Mr. Pharmacist?"

"Yeah?"

"Could I have this griffin, please?!"

She went right for it?!

"No way!"

"I can't?" Eva's shoulders slumped sadly.

I mean, what'd she expect? "What happened to your familiar?"

"The other day, during one of our adventures..." Eva sniffled loudly.

Aww. It must've perished.

"It ran away when I wasn't looking!"

"That's it?!" I'm an idiot for assuming it died trying to protect her or something.

"So, right now, I'm a monster tamer without a monster," the girl concluded.
I guess that's like being a swordsman without a sword.

"Most griffins are untamable. But they can run on land and fly, and they're good fighters too."

"Kyu! Kyuu!" Griffy's eyes sparkled at her compliments. It flapped its wings, blowing the straw beneath it into the air.

"It's a miracle that your griffin is so friendly."

Griffy was friendly and tame because we'd hatched and raised it. The problem was, finding griffin eggs wasn't easy.

"I get you. A griffin familiar would be super useful, not to mention strong," I told her.

"Plus, everyone would be impressed!" Eva said. "They'd go, 'Wow, that monster tamer's got a griffin?! Amazing!' I could brag to all the other monster tamers."

What a delightfully self-absorbed motive. "I can't give you Griffy, but I think I could help you find a new familiar," I offered.

"Really?!"

I nodded and led Eva into the drugstore.

"Whoa! There're so many different products!"

I put two items on the counter. "This and this," I muttered. "For now, anyway."

"What're these, Mr. Pharmacist?"

"One's called Translator DX. It lets you communicate telepathically with highly intelligent creatures. You can understand and even talk to them."

“Astounding!” Eva looked at the other product. “What’s this, then?!”

“Monster seasoning. You sprinkle it on food. It smells delicious to monsters.”

“What the—?!” Eva balked. “That’d be so useful to us monster tamers, it’s practically cheating!”

“Master?” Noela quietly peeked into the drugstore. “Customer?”

“Wh—who’s that, Mr. Pharmacist?”

“Oh, this is Noela the werewolf.”

“Noela is Noela...” My fluffy buddy greeted Eva timidly, staying cautious.

“Augh! I can’t take it! I’m dying! She’s so cute—the most precious little thing! I’m going to die, here and now!” Eva reached out and lunged at Noela, panting.

“Groo?!” Noela quickly hid behind me.

“Eva, I get that she’s sweet and all, but please don’t scare her.”

“Oh—sorry. I couldn’t help myself. Tee hee!” Eva giggled mischievously.

“Anyway,” I continued, “with these products, you should find a new familiar relatively easily.”

“Really? Hearing out the monster’s thoughts does sound great, but if I wind up taming a monster that hates me, I’m not sure I could handle the verbal abuse.”

Would a monster really bully a monster tamer like some keyboard warrior lurking in the dark reaches of the internet? I wondered. But I figured that, even if they didn’t really want to, monster tamers probably had to carry a whip and order their familiars around. It probably wasn’t uncommon for the monsters to hate them.

“Well, I’m sure that if you love your familiars...” I trailed off.

“It’d hurt because I *do* love them!” Eva sounded distressed.

Her old familiar did run away, after all. That’s got to be rough.

“That’s why I’d like you to give me Griffy or Noela, if possible.”

“Not happening.”

Behind me, Noela nodded repeatedly.

"I figured." Sighing, Eva bought both the products I'd recommended and left the drugstore.

"Noela feel guilty, Master."

"Don't say that."

It was about time for Ejil to arrive for his shift. *If we help Eva find a new familiar, I guess Mina can watch the drugstore till Ejil gets here.*

"Mina, would you mind keeping an eye on the store until Ejil starts work?" I called.

"Of course not! Have fun." Mina saw Noela and me off with a smile.

The two of us caught up to Eva, who was walking away from the store with droopy, shuffling steps.

"Hey! Eva! Wait up!"

"Mr. Pharmacist? Noela?!"

As I caught my breath, Noela explained our plan to the monster tamer.

"Master and Noela help Eva find monster buddy."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Worried, so..."

"How can I ever repay you? I'm sorry for the trouble, but I'm awfully grateful!"

"It's all good!" I assured her.

We asked what kind of familiar she'd prefer.

"Let's see." Eva paused. "A cute, strong familiar would be awesome."

Cute and strong, huh? Those feel like polar opposites. I glanced at Noela. *I guess they can kind of work together, though.* Noela looked cute when she did pretty much anything. And, although I'd never actually seen her fight as a wolf, her other form seemed strong.

"By the way, Eva, what kind of familiar did you have before?"

“A golem, actually.”

Not cute at all.

I knew that for a fact, despite never having seen a golem in person. Apparently, they were popular among monster tamers. Lots of rookie tamers went for them first, enticed by their strength. And golems weren't particularly self-possessed, so they were often comparatively loyal.

A loyal golem ditched its tamer? Really?

“The first step is getting friendly with a monster and dropping your guard,” Eva told us. “Once you do that, you can use ‘pactio’ magic on a monster you like, and they’ll become your familiar.”

Why’d her golem run away from her?

As I listened to Eva chatter about professional monster taming, we wound up in a forest I often visited to forage for ingredients.

“A bunch of familiars would be hard to deal with,” Eva mused. “But I’d like at least one monster that’s both cute and powerful.”

Are there monsters like that here?

Noela sniffed the air to detect threats and then told me the forest monsters’ locations.

Chugging some Translator DX, Eva took a deep breath. “Let’s go find them!”

But Noela’s expression stiffened. “Over there! Big!” Her enemy-tracing ability could detect the size of threats—small, average, or large. “Rare scent, Master!”

A rare scent? Eva charged forward excitedly, and Noela and I cautiously followed.

Once we got close, Noela hid in the shadows, pointing. “M-Master, th-there.”

“Bwaaaaah! Bwaaaaah!”

It was some half-naked, middle-aged guy. He was holding a bow, and he looked like a run-of-the-mill hunter. Actually, that’s not quite right. He had long hair, a beard, a hairy chest—oh, and a horse’s lower body.

Wait. Is that a—

“A centaur!” Eva cried. “Oh my gosh! I can’t even deal! I love him! I’m *dying*!”

She certainly has an interesting definition of “dying.”

As Eva shrieked, the centaur noticed us. “Bwaaaah!”

Just because his upper body is human doesn’t mean he speaks a human language, I guess.

The centaur aimed its bow and fired at us.

“Yikes!”

“Here, Master!” Noela yanked me into the shadows by my shirt, and the arrow missed.

“You’re a lifesaver!” I told her.

“Garroo!”

Eva clenched her fists. “All right, I’ve decided. He’s the one!”

Wait. Really?

“That’s the cute, strong beast I’ve always wanted.”

Strong, I get—but which part of that macho monster is cute?!

We had no clue what the centaur was saying, so we downed some Translator DX.

“I shall make this forest mine!” he bellowed. “Bwa ha ha ha!”

Aw, crap.

“You humans, hiding over there! Leave my forest at once! Never again come before me!”

He knows we’re here.

“This forest where Master met Noela!” Noela objected. “No want weird old man here!”

“Makes sense.” It’d be a hassle if I couldn’t forage for herbs and stuff in these woods anymore, so we had a real problem on our hands.

“Um...my name’s Eva!” the monster tamer called to the centaur. “For lots of

reasons...I choose you!”

Her wording reminds me of that one monster-collecting video game...but that's irrelevant.

“Leave at once, young human! I will not repeat myself!” The centaur dude seemed stubborn.

“Um, please tell me your name!” Eva persisted, doing her best to build a connection between them.

“I’m a half-human, half-beast demon! A centaur! I have no name!”

If the centaur formed a pact with Eva, chances were he’d leave the forest instead of trying to rule it. That meant I needed to ensure that he *did* become her familiar. Eva had some monster seasoning with her, but that would just smell good to the centaur, not persuade it to team up with her.

Hold on. What if I did some mixing?

“Make something, Master?”

“Yup. I need you to stay here. If things go off the rails, save Eva.”

“Right!”

I left the scene, hurrying out of the forest. By the time I returned to the drugstore, I was totally winded.

“Ah! Hello, Doctor. Are you in a hurry? Didn’t you just leave?” Ejil asked as he watched the store, a puzzled look on his face.

“A centaur is trying to, um, take over the woods,” I replied.

“Hunh.”

I’d figured that Ejil wouldn’t get it. I also didn’t have time to explain things to him. Holing up in the lab, I grabbed some monster seasoning, lure, and emotional drive (which I’d opted never to put on sale). I extracted and mixed their active ingredients, ensuring that the new product’s effects wouldn’t be too strong. *Bam—done!*

Millet Dumpling Paste: Condiment for monster taming. Dramatically

increases a monster's sociability when ingested. Become fast friends with a grumpy, towering, or wary monster!

This should help Eva befriend that centaur. I raced out of the lab and rode Griffy back to the woods.

"Griff's just delighted to go for a run with Master!" Obviously, Griffy was on cloud nine.

If I'd brought Ejil, he could've pulled rank on the centaur, but the less powerful monster would probably just have obeyed the demon king temporarily. It would've been up to its old tricks once Ejil left.

Griffy and I entered the forest, making our way toward the spot we'd left earlier. I heard voices.

"Didn't I tell you? You can't make trouble for people!"

"I didn't think I was."

What the...?

"I don't want to hear excuses! This forest would be peaceful if you hadn't popped up here. If you're going to play king or whatever, do it somewhere else!"

I cocked my head. That bossy voice was familiar.

"Master!"

"What is it, Noela?"

"Vivi here!"

"Wha...?"

I looked. The drugstore's part-time spirit was, in fact, standing in front of the centaur and lecturing him. The middle-aged beast was even hanging his head.

"Hey, Vivi. What's going on?"

"Oh! Hey, Reiji! I'm just teaching this rude intruder how we do things here."

"Who's this human, Lady Vivi?"

Lady Vivi?

“My friend. And boss.”

“Your...friend?!” The man-beast’s eyes widened in shock.

“Since when are you so important, Vivi?”

She puffed out her chest proudly. “I *am* a lake spirit, you know. Enshrined by the people of the land and stuff. I’m actually pretty close to a deity, Reiji.”

I guess that whole “lake spirit” thing isn’t just ceremonial.

“Unfortunately, people *have* pretty much abandoned me these days,” Vivi added with a defeated smile.

It turned out that, after Eva’s encounter with the centaur got noisy, Vivi had shown up and asked Noela what was going on. Our favorite lake spirit could perform thought transference with intelligent animals and monsters even without Translator DX.

“You have way too much free time on your hands, Vivi,” I told her.

“I-I know I do! I wish you’d thank me first, though!”

“I’m just teasing you.” I smiled. “Seriously, thanks. You’re a lifesaver.”

Right. Down to business.

I handed Eva—who’d been listening to Vivi’s conversation with the centaur this whole time—the bottle of millet dumpling paste. “You should be able to use this to befriend that guy.”

“R-really?” She rummaged through her bag and pulled out some stale bread. Drizzling it with millet dumpling paste, she headed toward the monster.

Since the millet dumpling paste contains lure, even stale bread should work... probably.

“That bread you’re holding smells quite appetizing, young lady!” the centaur barked.

“Want some? I’d be happy to share.” She pulled off a chunk of bread and handed it to the centaur.

He munched on it. “Mmm! I’ve never eaten something so good!”

The beast flashed Eva an adoring look that just screamed, “Let’s be friends!”

Eva held out her hand. “Gimme your paw!”

She’s already patronizing him?!

The centaur hesitated, taken aback, before giving up and placing his hand on hers.

“If you form a pact with me, you’ll get to eat tons,” Eva told him. “So, um, want to be my familiar?”

“You’re a fascinating young lady, and I was getting bored with the forest,” the centaur replied. “Fine...I accept your offer.” They shook hands to seal the deal.

“Thanks, Mr. Pharmacist!” Eva squealed. “Now I’ll have my own cute, strong familiar!”

I get it...he’s strong. But cute? No way.

Eva successfully cast pactio magic, officially making the “cute, strong” centaur her familiar. The monster tamer still had some Translator DX, and the centaur seemed to have a surprisingly good head on his shoulders, so I figured their partnership might actually work.

After that little happy ending, we left the forest and went our separate ways.

“Tamers are amazing,” I mused.

“Master Noela’s tamer!”

“Griff’s too! Master is Griff’s master!”

I guess, if they both see me as their “master,” that must make me a monster tamer, huh?

As we reentered the drugstore, I spotted Ejil holding a bottle of millet dumpling paste, a fearless smirk on his face. “You’ve created something quite incredible, Doctor!”

“Wait. Don’t tell me...” *Is he going to use it to bolster his army?!*

Ejil whirled his cape behind him. “With this, I shall make Noela mine!”

Oh, right. It's Ejil. My bad, I forgot.

"This is it, my dear Noela!" Ejil poured some potion into a cup and then mixed in millet dumpling paste.

"Garoo?!" Noela didn't even try to resist. Instead, she darted toward Ejil, grabbed the cup, and chugged the drink.

"Well, what do you think, Noela? Can we be friends?"

"No, Ejil. Impossible is impossible."

"Wh-what?!"

Game, set, match.

I understood Noela's reaction. The millet dumpling paste increased a monster's affinity for someone by a huge margin, but if they loathed that person, it would barely make a difference.

"Why?!" Ejil yelped. "You tricked me, Doctor!"

"You made your bed, now lie in it. And don't waste products like that. I'm deducting the cost of the potion you opened from your salary."

"Right. Sorry."

If the millet dumpling paste didn't work, Ejil's got no chance in hell, huh?

Chapter 8:

A Misused Product

AFTER WE HELPED Eva the monster tamer, a lot more adventurers from afar dropped into the drugstore, thanks to word of mouth. We sold lots of potions, stomach meds, and Translator DX for conversing with monsters and animals. Things were going well. The adventurers tended to stay in town for a while, so the inn and Rena's Rabbit Tavern also profited.

"How's it hangin'?" called Thors, an adventurer who'd come into the drugstore a lot lately. Thors was in his mid-twenties with a sturdy body and a scar on his cheek. He talked pretty crudely, but he wasn't a bad guy.

"Welcome, Thors," I replied. "What's up?"

"Reiji, bud, that thing I bought missed the mark!"

"Whoa—really? Sorry."

"Nah, no big. It's handy, all right. It's just falling short."

Oh. I see.

Thors had last popped in about two weeks earlier for a product to illuminate caves. I'd recommended Special Coating X.

"It's crazy useful," Thors told me. "It lights up everything I apply it to. I can even track my party in the dark. And it's awesome that it doesn't wear off. Reapplying it because it got wet or rubbed away would be a pain in the neck."

Dang. That's a lot of compliments. "Then what's the problem?"

"Special Coating X helps me keep an eye on my party, but it's not like I can see the whole cave," Thors replied. "It's still too hard to spot bad terrain or traps in advance."

Got it. Special Coating X isn't quite right for the job.

"Lighting up our surroundings would be easy-peasy if I had a buddy who was good at that kind of magic. The folks I know only use defensive spells, though."

Rather than enlisting a new party member, Thors wanted to buy something

that would provide brighter light in a dark cave.

“Look, I’d bring somebody in if they were definitely trustworthy. But the reality is that some people get greedy, drag you down, and run off.” In short, adventuring with a stranger was pretty much life-threatening.

If he’s that likely to draw a bad hand hiring a party member, I see why it’s preferable to solve things by shopping, I mused.

“Oh! Welcome, Thors.” Mina popped out from the back, bringing us some tea.

“Hey, Mina. Busy as always?”

“Not at all!” She smiled warmly. “Please make yourself at home.”

As she left, Thors waved, face slack. *Hmm. So, that’s why he’s been coming here so often.*

“Wipe that grin off your face,” I said.

Thors looked away, scratching his cheek in embarrassment.

“I get it,” I continued. “Mina’s a great cook, and she’s perfect when it comes to customer service. But there’ve got to be attractive women in other towns.”

“Mina’s pick-me-ups are on another level, though,” Thors insisted. “She’s like an oasis that rejuvenates a tired adventurer’s heart. She’s seriously maternal.”

Maternal? It was true that, when I looked at Mina and Noela, they seemed more like mother and daughter than sisters.

“It’s not like I want to make a move on her,” Thors added. “I just kind of want to watch over her, if that makes sense.”

Wouldn’t someone “watch over her” from afar, though?

“I’m happy just to look in her eyes and chat.”

He’s like a junior high school boy.

Thors was in good company, though. I heard similar statements often; lots of guys visited the drugstore due to their soft spot for Noela’s fluffiness or for Mina herself. The guys who immediately asked about my relationship with one of the girls were the crazy serious ones.

I changed the subject. “Oh—did you hear that the Red Cat Brigade’s hiring? I bet they’d accept you.”

Annabelle had actually dropped in not long ago, complaining that no one with the right skills had applied. She’d asked me to say something if I met anyone promising, since lots of adventurers had been visiting the drugstore.

“Really?” Thors smiled. “I guess I’ll mull it over.” Judging by his expression, he was giving it some serious thought.

“Protecting Kalta would be a far cry from being an adventurer,” I said. “It’s a peaceful town in the boondocks, so the job wouldn’t exactly spice up your life.”

“I figured,” Thors replied, narrowing his eyes. “Anyhow, pal, think you can tweak Special Coating X for me?”

“Couldn’t a torch light a cave?”

“They’re bright enough. I’ve heard stories about them blowing folks up, though.”

Like, an adventurer accidentally lit a fuse with a torch or something? Yeah, that wouldn’t be good.

“Special Coating X isn’t really designed to illuminate things,” I admitted. “I’m basically going to make an entirely new product.”

“Hey, I can’t let you do that just for me. I’ll make do with what I got.”

Man, Thors is a good guy.

Customers tended to ask the impossible of me. It wasn’t that big a deal, but they basically wanted me to create whatever they were looking for, come hell or high water. People didn’t really think about what I had to do to make that happen.

“Don’t worry, Thors. I can make a new product for you,” I assured him. “If something happened to you during an adventure, I’d be bummed.”

“Reiji...thank you.”

I chuckled, slightly embarrassed. “I’ll go whip that up right now. Stay put.”

I called Noela in to watch the store. She got along with the adventurer in her

own way.

“Hi, Buff-Buff,” she greeted Thors.

“Hey, Fluff-Fluff.”

With the drugstore in Noela’s hands, I headed to the lab.

Special Coating X helped things show up in the dark, but it didn’t produce light, and spreading it on a cave’s walls would just be too much work.

Luminescence...

An object that continuously gave off light could be a hassle too. I tried to picture a torch that didn’t require fire. “Hmm... This should work.”

Single-Use Light Source: Shines continuously once spread on an object’s surface.

I made the single-use light source in four colors: red, blue, yellow, and green. When I applied the red formula to a pestle, it glowed faintly. *Perfect.*

I carried the pestle into the store. “How’s this look?”

Thors and Noela must’ve been bored; they’d started thumb wrestling.

“Garoo...roo!”

“Dang! Not bad, Fluff-Fluff!”

Well, then. “Thors?”

“Hey, Reiji! Already done?”

Noela’s eyes sparkled as I distracted the adventurer. She took his thumb down swiftly. “Noela win!”

“Gah! I’ll get revenge next time.”

“Understood. Challenge accepted.”

“That’s *my* line!”

Looks like Noela made a new friend.

Thors turned back to me. “That’s the stuff?”

“Yup. What do you think?”

He looked down at the pestle, cocking his head. “It barely glows.”

Oh, yeah. In here, it’s hard to tell how bright the light is. I closed the drugstore’s doors, windows, and shades. The red light on the pestle shone throughout the room.

Noela’s eyes widened. “Red glow!”

“Whoa!” Thors exclaimed. “That’s the stuff! Just what I wanted!”

That’s what I like to hear.

Noela left the drugstore, soon rushing back with her trusty stick in hand. “Noela’s weapon!”

Play weapon, maybe. That stick might look tough, but it doesn’t “swoosh” like a real weapon when you swing it.

“Master color. Make shiny strong!” the werewolf girl blurted out, excited.

I applied all the single-use light source colors except red to Noela’s stick. The four hues illuminated the drugstore.

“Groo!” Noela seemed stunned by all the light.

Mina came in. “Wh-what’s going on? It’s beautiful!”

I explained the new product I’d made.

Her eyes sparkled. “You’re quite a romantic, Mr. Reiji, illuminating the night like this!”

This product wasn’t just supposed to “illuminate the night,” but that was neither here nor there.

Thors seemed to have an epiphany. “Sell me some, Reiji!”

“Of course. That was the plan.”

The adventurer bought all four shades of the single-use light source; as he left, he looked confident.

At any rate, I’m glad I could give him a hand.

A few days later, Thors and four party members dropped in just before the drugstore closed. The adventurer looked nervous, like a kid at his first piano recital. “Could you get Mina for me?”

“Er...sure.” Puzzled, I called Mina.

Thors and his companions asked us to follow them outside. We did, and the visitors lined up next to each other. Mina and I had no clue what was going on.

“Please watch carefully, Mina!” exclaimed Thors.

He and his buddies had been hiding short sticks behind their backs. Now, they each gripped one in their fingers. Every stick was coated with one of the single-use light source colors I’d sold Thors the other day.

The five adventurers began to dance, swinging the glowing sticks. Since it was dark outside, the lights looked especially pretty.

Wait...where have I seen this before? Isn’t this what idol fans do at concerts?

I doubted that Thors’s party was familiar with the concept, but this was obviously the same thing.

Each time the adventurers swung the one-time light sources...that is, the glow sticks...the colors danced in space. Eventually, the five wrapped up their little performance, out of breath.

“How was our routine?” Thors asked.

“Beautiful! You’re all incredible!” Mina earnestly replied, applauding happily.

Thors and his companions were bashful but clearly relieved that they’d pulled the dance off. They high-fived.

Am I watching the season finale of a high school TV drama or something? I didn’t create the light source to use like that! Please follow the instructions!

Chapter 9:

“Noela Hate Fish!”

THIS WORLD’S INHABITANTS mostly boiled or fried fish; there was no tradition of eating it raw. That’d been the case ever since I arrived in Kalta, and frankly, I had a hankering for raw fish—not fried dried fish but proper sashimi. (Craving carefully rolled sushi would’ve been greedy.)

After lunch, Mina peered into the fridge Paula and I had made and posed a question. “What would you like for dinner, Mr. Reiji?”

“Sashimi.”

“What’s that?”

I figured she wouldn’t know. “Bite-sized pieces of fresh fish, basically.”

“Do you fry it?”

“Nope. You eat it raw.”

“That’ll upset your stomach.”

“Not if it’s fresh.”

“Hrm?” Mina gave me a confused look.

I understood. If you’d never had sashimi, it was hard to imagine. Even the Rabbit Tavern usually served fried or boiled seafood.

“Let’s fry some dried fish for dinner,” Mina suggested.

No, Mina! That’s all wrong. I didn’t actually say that aloud, though. Mina was the one cooking, after all; I didn’t want to burden her with my selfishness.

The workday ended. Come evening, I smelled the delicious scent of fried fish. Noela, who was watching me tidy the drugstore, also caught the scent. She tilted her head. “Groo? Today fish?”

“Smells like it.”

“Noela hate fish! Want meat!”

“Don’t be like that.”

Now that I thought about it, Noela really wasn’t a seafood person. It made sense that a werewolf preferred meat, but... “How come you hate fish, Noela?”

“Hate bones.”

Ah. When I was a little kid, I’d been like that too. It was simple to debone fish if you knew where their bones were, but if you tried to eat them as fast as meat, the bones would definitely get stuck in your throat and hurt you. On top of that, deboning fish was just extra work.

“Meat tasty taste. Fish different.”

That’s really not true. Wait, since she’s a werewolf, is it possible that she prefers raw meat? When we’d held our riverside barbecue, Noela had grabbed and eaten a slice of meat basically seconds after we started cooking it.

Heh heh... I think I’ve got a shot. I’ll make Noela my partner in crime! “Have you ever had fish sashimi, Noela?”

“Tasty taste?”

“Yeah, super tasty! Sashimi’s so sweet, it fools you into thinking you’re eating meat. The fat content depends on the season, but as soon as you put a piece in your mouth, the fat melts away.”

As I described the best sashimi I’d ever eaten on Earth, Noela started to drool. “Master...sashimi smelly?”

“Not when it’s fresh.” Raw fish from Vivi’s lake smelled, so serving ocean fish as sashimi would make the most sense.

“Bones?”

“Not in sashimi.” If you tried to fillet bony river fish to serve as sashimi, the pieces would be way too small. Noela seemed fascinated. “Want to try some sashimi, fluffball?”

“Yeah!”

Perfect. I’ve got her on my side.

The next day, I found Mina and suggested riding Griffy to the nearby port town, San Logro.

“Noela feels like sampling fish for once,” I explained. “This could be a great chance to get her to chill out about eating it.”

Mina glanced at Noela. Last night, she’d barely touched the fish fillets Mina served; she wouldn’t take any bites from spots near bones in case more bones were hidden within. Once I helped the werewolf girl enjoy raw fish, though, she’d turn over a new leaf.

“You’re right—this could be a good opportunity!” Mina agreed. “I’d like to eat fresh fish as well.”

“Then it’s decided. On our next day off, let’s go back to San Logro.”

With that, I’d successfully roped everyone into my selfish sashimi craving.

On the morning of our next day off, Mina, Noela, and I hopped on Griffy and made our way toward San Logro. Unfortunately, Griffy couldn’t enter the town, since the locals might attack a griffin. We had it wait a short distance away.

“Kyu! Kyu!” Griffy shrieked sadly as we left.

“Noela bring back sashimi, Griffy. Hang tight!” Noela said.

“Kyuuuuu...” Looking downcast, Griffy turned and hid in the forest.

No worries, buddy. We’ll get you some treats.

After walking down the road for about an hour, we finally arrived in San Logro. I could smell the seashore, and now and then I heard seagulls.

San Logro’s hustle and bustle was pretty much picture-perfect for a port town; all kinds of people were going to and fro. The last time the three of us had visited, we’d done barely any sightseeing, so we took our time looking at the ships on the pier.

“That’s a fishing boat,” I told Noela.

“Wow! Look strong.”

“It doesn’t fight.”

“Groo?” Noela cocked her head.

Mina giggled warmly, holding her wide-brimmed, ladylike hat so it didn’t blow away.

A guy who looked like a fisherman was cleaning the boat interior. *I get why a landlocked town’s residents wouldn’t eat raw fish. But what about a fisherman here in San Logro?*

“Um, excuse me,” I called. “Could I have a moment?”

“Hrm? What can I do ya for, lad?”

“Do you know what species of fish is best for sashimi?”

“‘Sasheemee’? Whazzat?”

“A fish fillet you eat raw and—”

The fisherman’s hands froze. He peered at me cautiously. “Boy, are you talkin’ about you-know-what?”

I nodded, smiling at him. “Yup. That’s the stuff.” *I knew it! Fishermen have the best fresh fish at their fingertips. Of course they know how delicious sashimi is!*

The fisherman smirked. “Have ya said a word about it to anyone else?”

“Just these two young ladies.”

“Good.” He nodded. “Don’t gossip too much about it. If too many folks get to learnin’ about it, war’ll break out!”

Okay, maybe you’re exaggerating a little? Sashimi isn’t some kind of ancient weapon.

“I’m looking for a restaurant or something where I could order some,” I added.

“Between you and me, west from the main street, there’s an old pub,” the fisherman told me. “It’s the sorta back-alley joint only local fishermen know about. Head there an’ say Yazan the fisherman sent ya. I reckon they’ll give ya whatcha want.”

I take it this fisherman past his prime is Yazan. Man, it sounds like we’ll be doing something really sketchy. I hope the stuff in the pub actually turns out to

be sashimi.

“Thanks very much,” I told Yazan, and we left the port.

Mina and Noela looked nervous.

“I had no idea sashimi was worth starting a war over, Mr. Reiji!” Mina exclaimed.

The sashimi I’ve had never caused wars. Little squabbles, at worst.

“Noela still want.”

Me too, fluffball.

We headed west off the main street into a narrow alleyway, as Yazan had instructed, and discovered a small pub.

This is it. The pub looked old, as Yazan said; even the sign out front was unreadable. *Who knows what this place is called?*

It was still morning, but since we’d gotten up early, I was already starving. Beside me, Noela’s stomach let out a familiar, laser-gun growl.

“Somebody’s hungry.”

“Hurry, Master! Noela want sashimi!”

The pub’s closed door made barging in seem extra awkward. I peeked into the window near us; no one appeared to be sitting inside. *If this place serves fishermen, it might already be closed.*

I tried knocking first. Since there was no response, I placed my hand on the door and slowly pushed it open.

A man with gray hair stood behind the counter. He honestly looked just like an old-fashioned gentleman, mustache and all. If this pub had smelled like coffee and had jazz playing in the background, it would’ve been a perfect café.

“Well, look at this. New faces!” he said. “I apologize, but we’re closed for today.”

“Oh, really? Sorry for barging in like this,” I replied. “I heard about this place from Yazan the fisherman.”

The gentleman paused. "Yazan, you say?"

Ah, did I pique his interest? I nodded. "He told me about this pub because I wanted to eat a certain dish."

"Is that so? Please forgive me! I had no idea."

"No, no! It's fine." I waved away his apology.

"Please, have a seat. If Yazan told you about this place, I can't very well turn you away!"

Noela, Mina, and I took him up on his offer, sitting at the bar. We glanced at one another. *Who the heck is Yazan?*

"I'm terribly sorry to make you go out of your way," Mina told the fellow.

"Noela want eat sashimi!" The hungry monster that was Noela snorted loudly, as if attempting to ingest the smell of the pub itself.

"In San Logro, we call this dish 'katsugyo,'" the old gentleman revealed.

That's literally "live fish" in Japanese. "Could you serve us three varieties you recommend?"

"Of course!"

The gentleman clearly prepared the pub's sashimi himself; his knifework was impeccable. He carved an unfamiliar red fish, sliced up a *green* fish, and then set the first plate of translucent white sashimi on the bar.

"This fish, Master?"

"Yup."

"So, this is what sashimi looks like," Mina murmured.

Noela stared at the plate curiously and then leaned closer to smell it. She sprinkled salt on the sashimi at the plate's edge and took a bite. "Groo? Arrooooo! Crunchy, tasty, no bones!"

"Isn't it good, Miss Fluffball?" The older gentleman smiled.

"Groo! Compliments to chef!"

Acting like a sashimi connoisseur, are you?

“I’ve done this for quite a long time,” the gentleman replied.

He’s super humble.

Mina took a bite of sashimi herself. She had the same reaction as Noela. “This is raw fish...? But it’s delicious!”

“Indeed! The fish is so fresh, it can be eaten uncooked,” the gentleman explained.

Noela was wolfing the sashimi down, so I rushed to eat some before it all disappeared. *Yeah, this is delish. It’s been ages since I had good sashimi.*

“Do you drink, lad? How about a glass of white wine?”

“Ah, sure. Just a little.”

I slowly indulged in the wine as I ate. It complemented the fish’s savory aftertaste; the delicious flavors brought out the best in each other.

“Noela drink.”

“Not wine, you’re not.”

“Arroo...”

Although I was fine with visiting San Logro for sashimi, I wondered whether we could figure out a way to import fresh fish to Kalta. If so, restaurants like the Rabbit Tavern could help popularize sashimi, and I’d be able to eat it whenever.

“I need to discuss something with you, sir,” I told the gentleman. “There’s a little town called Kalta north of here.”

“Now, that brings me back! I’m actually *from* Kalta.”

“What a coincidence!” Mina piped up warmly.

Right. I totally forgot that Kalta is Mina’s hometown.

“Did something happen there?” the gentleman asked.

“Not really. But I was wondering whether we could find a way to eat katsugyo there too.”

“Ha ha ha! Now, that’s a good one, lad. You can’t make fish into katsugyo if it’s not fresh.”

“So, what if we could keep it fresh?”

“That’s...”

“Impossible? Is it really?” My eyes sparkled as I pulled two products from my bag. “This right here is a preservative. It keeps food from rotting. And this icy gel chills anything you apply it to.”

The preservative was designed to go in a refrigerator, but someone transporting fresh fish could just put it in a crate. If you applied the icy gel inside the crate as well, you’d have a makeshift fridge.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I think we could use these products to ship fresh fish from San Logro to Kalta without a significant drop in quality. If you aren’t full of hot air, that is.”

I totally understood the old gentleman’s suspicions. After all, he had no clue who I was.

“Please give them a try,” I urged. “Apply the icy gel inside a crate and add the preservative. Then, wait a day...no, two days.”

We put the preservative in a crate with some fish. (Needless to say, I purchased the fish from the pub first.) The crate was wooden, so it wasn’t airtight. That would normally have been a problem, but fortunately, the fish were wrapped in large leaves; I applied icy gel to the leaves and rewrapped them.

“That’s it?” The gentleman seemed doubtful. Nevertheless, I told him I’d be back the day after tomorrow, and we left.

“Are you certain those products will work?” Mina asked, clearly worried.

“It takes a horse and carriage one day to get from San Logro to Kalta,” I pointed out. “Or, if we’re talking about a merchant transporting inventory, it takes two days at most. That should be fine.”

If this worked as planned, we’d start a food revolution, not just in Kalta but in San Logro too.

“Noela want more sashimi.”

Fluffball's on board. "That's what fish really tastes like, Noela," I reminded her.

"Fish tasty taste!"

I think the strongest selling point is that she doesn't have to pick bones out of sashimi, but that's hardly worth mentioning.

At Noela's request, we ate lots of fish in San Logro. The only restaurant to offer sashimi, however, was the old pub. *I guess only a handful of people have tried katsugyo.*

The sun was finally setting, so we rode Griffy home.

Two days later, I left the drugstore to the other staff members and rode Griffy back to the pub, as I'd promised the old-fashioned gentleman.

When I went inside, I found him staring at something in his hands. "Th-this is just..."

"Pardon me," I said. He noticed my presence. "How'd it work, sir?"

He hurried to show me the fish we'd left in the crate. "L-Look! Sure, compared to the first day, it's a little less fresh. But just a little! And it's been two days!" He looked at me and then the fish, bewildered.

"I'd love to try a bite."

With his beautiful knifework, the man sliced the fish into three sections and served it as sashimi.

I bit into the first piece. "Mmm! It's great."

I had the gentleman take a bite too. "Delicious!"

"I do have a feeling the flavor's ripened," I admitted. "That'll vary with the type of fish."

"You're right—it's not rotten, but the flavor's a bit stronger," he mused. "So, that's what happens if you preserve fresh fish for a couple days. This... This..."

I watched him quizzically.

“This is revolutionary! It will change everything about the fish market!”

“With the preservative and icy gel, Kalta and San Logro will be sashimi hot spots,” I agreed. Satisfied that my idea for storing fresh fish had worked, I started to leave.

“L-Lad! Let me get your name, at least!”

“Reiji! I run a drugstore in Kalta. I’ll be back!”

Mina and Noela would be so excited now that we could eat sashimi at home.

As I restocked the lab, I heard a booming voice from the drugstore entrance. “Yoo-hoo!”

Noela’s quiet footsteps moved toward the source of the voice. “Groo! Arrived!”

I dropped what I was doing and went to look. Vin the trader was handing Noela a wooden crate which, judging by its unique raw scent, contained the good stuff.

Noela was already excited; she probably imagined that the crate held pre-sliced sashimi. “Mina! Mina! Tasty arrived!” she cried, disappearing into the kitchen.

“Thanks, Vin.”

“No problem at all! I had to deliver something to Paula anyway, so this worked out,” the lively young man said with a grin.

I paid the delivery fee for the crate of fish, then handed Vin a package containing my “fish-market revolution kit”—preservative and icy gel. I was sending it to the old-fashioned gentleman who’d shipped us this crate of fish.

Fresh fish could be a little expensive, and since Vin brought it, we had to pay for delivery. But hey, if it meant the drugstore got regular shipments of fresh fish, then it was worth it. *This really is revolutionary.*

“Man, now that I can sell fish from San Logro, I’ll make extra money just by heading there for work!” Vin said with a guffaw. “Later!”

He left, driving his cart of goods toward the center of town. Apparently, he was also delivering fish to the inn's pub, the Rabbit Tavern, and three other spots.

I knew that Rena at the Rabbit Tavern was delighted about the fresh-fish deliveries—as was Vin, obviously. If it meant I'd made so many people happy, coming up with the "fish-market revolution kit" had been worthwhile.

"Shall we have sashimi for dinner?" Mina suggested.

"Garoo!"

The gentleman from San Logro had taught Mina and a number of Kalta's other cooks to make sashimi. When he visited town, he'd run a cooking class for anyone who wanted to learn. Not long ago, Kalta only had two options when it came to fish—fried or boiled—but now, restaurants served all kinds of sashimi dishes.

"Thanks to the fish-market revolution kit, lots of folks enjoy sashimi now, and I get to eat it whenever," I reflected. "There's no downside!"

It was a happy ending indeed.

Chapter 10:

Enjoying a Tiny Test Drive

OUTSIDE THE DRUGSTORE, I could hear Doz and Annabelle chatting.

“Hey, Doz, keep a stiff upper lip! You’re really a pain in the ass!”

“Sorry, Boss!”

I got up and took a look. Doz was sitting down, and Annabelle stood beside him, heaving a sigh.

“Hi, folks. Is something wrong?”

“Ah! Pharmacist! This oaf dropped his guard durin’ training!” Annabelle said, and Doz hung his head. “He messed up his leg. The Brigade just ran outta potions, so I came to grab some!”

“You all right, Doz?”

“I messed up bad, Medicine God.”

I hurriedly got a few potions from the drugstore and then headed out. “Here.”

“I owe ya, Pharmacist,” Annabelle said. “Sorry I’m always relyin’ on you.”

I shook my head. “Bringing someone who’s been hurt for a potion is no problem.”

“In principle, it ain’t. But in emergencies, Red Cat Brigade members have to *carry* the injured!” Annabelle retorted. “And, heck, sometimes we all gotta retreat at once!”

“In emergencies, huh?” *They must have to carry the casualties if there’s a fire or something. Or if people get hurt during bandit attacks. Just imagining it gives me the chills.*

“That’s all fine and dandy if we’ve got enough potions,” Annabelle added. “But if we run out, we gotta haul damn heavy cargo!”

Annabelle’s second-in-command was so huge, I could see how moving him would be tricky. Potions healed most injuries, but not instantaneously, so selling Annabelle a bunch wouldn’t fix the problem.

“Sorry to be damn heavy cargo, Boss,” Doz apologized again. After drinking a potion, he checked his injured left leg and then rose to his feet. “Ugh! O-ow... It still hurts a little, but it’s nothin’ I can’t deal with.”

“Sit down, numbskull,” Annabelle snapped. “What’ll you do if it gets worse?”

“She’s right. Please stop pushing yourself.” I let Doz lean on my shoulder, helping him sit.

“I ain’t got any issue with how your potions work—they’re the best,” Annabelle told me. “That’s why I’d hate to ask you for more help.” Nonetheless, it went without saying that looking out for Red Cat Brigade members was her job as captain.

“Annabelle’s tough as nails, huh?” I whispered to Doz.

“Sure is. That’s part of her charm!”

The Red Cat Brigade had helped me out quite a bit, and I totally understood why Annabelle was exasperated. “Hrm. Something other than a potion...”

My medicine-making skill responded. *Hunh. I can make that, eh?*

“Mind if I try creating a new product?” I asked Annabelle.

“Huh? That’s fine with me, but, uh...what’re you thinkin’?”

“I want to make something to help you if someone gets injured and there’re no potions around. I’ll get Doz to test it.”

Annabelle’s face lit up as she guessed my intent. “I get it now! You’re gonna make poison to put ’em outta their misery!”

“Wrong!” *Damn, she’s violent.*

Annabelle cracked up.

“You’re so mean sometimes, Boss!” Doz complained.

“I was just kiddin’! Pharmacist, if you’ve got a good plan, give it a try.”

Hearing Annabelle’s encouragement, I decided to plow ahead with no ifs, ands, or buts. I holed up in the lab, gathered and measured some ingredients, and mixed them.

“With this stuff, the Red Cat Brigade should be able to transport any wounded with ease,” I muttered. “It’ll be especially useful for moving big groups of people.”

The bottle’s contents glowed, showing that I’d created a new product.

Giant Minimizer: People and animals that ingest this liquid temporarily shrink to fit in a human palm.

Bam! No more struggling to carry things—well, to carry people or animals, at least.

I brought Doz and Annabelle the first bottle of giant minimizer right away. “Doz, if you drink this, you’ll shrink.”

“No way!” Annabelle exclaimed. “Actually...yes way. After all, *you* made this product.” She and Doz inspected the bottle curiously. “So, if someone’s injured and can’t move, this makes ’em easier to carry?”

“Right,” I confirmed. “I’d still recommend potions over this stuff. But if you don’t have any, or if you just drank a potion and can’t afford to wait to heal, this giant minimizer should be handy.”

“I see.” Annabelle lifted her chin. “Hey! Doz!”

He nodded. “I’ll take some, Medicine God!”

“Isn’t it about time you stopped calling me that? I’d appreciate it.” With a smug grin, I handed Doz the bottle, and he promptly downed the liquid. “How’s it taste?”

“Fine. Not delicious or anythin’, but it ain’t terrible.”

I quickly rubbed my eyes. Doz and his clothes had just shrunk by about half. His giant frame was now around the size of mine. *Wait, no! He’s even smaller now!*

“Wha—?!” Doz shouted. “Boss? Reiji? Is it just me, or are you two bigger?!”

“Other way around, Doz. You’re tiny!” I said. He actually *kept* shrinking.

“Whoa! Look at that! You’re so small!”

“No kiddin’!” Annabelle agreed.

Doz was now one-tenth his normal size. The tiny veteran mercenary seemed shocked. “You two are gigantic!”

“Hunh. That stuff really could come in handy,” Annabelle mused. “Carryin’ tons of injured patients can be rough, and it ain’t like potions heal everythin’ right away.”

According to my medicine-making skill, the potions the drugstore currently sold were the strongest possible without side effects, so I hadn’t created more powerful ones.

Smack! Annabelle flicked Mini-Doz with her middle finger.

As her fingertip made contact, her second-in-command flew about thirty centimeters backward. “Eyaaaah!”

“Um... Annabelle?” Despite my serious tone, Annabelle was belly-laughing, flicking tears out of her eyes. *This must be pretty funny to her.* “Doing that could literally kill him,” I warned her.

I tried to find Mini-Doz but had no luck. *Where’d he go? Seriously, he just landed here a second ago. Is he okay?*

After a while, I spotted Mini-Doz directly below Annabelle. She was still cackling; meanwhile, he stared straight upward with a solemn expression. *When did he get there?*

“Standing under her isn’t a great idea, Doz. You’re going to get killed.”

“Reiji, I’ve got important news,” Doz called up to me. “The boss’s panties are —”

Those were his final words before Annabelle’s boot squashed him. *Crunch!*

“What’d I tell you, Doz?!” I cried.

Enraged, Annabelle smooshed him with her foot. Doz was twitching. *Yikes.*

“What gave you the right to do that, shrunk or not?!” she snapped.

“L-Listen, Reiji...”

Ah. He survived.

“The boss may have a foul mouth and act manly, but she’s dressed prim underneath!”

Crunch!

“Doz!” He looks so peaceful. Like he doesn’t have any regrets in the world.

Annabelle, on the other hand, blushed as she picked up the (unconscious?) Doz and flung him into the horizon. “Hmph!”

“Make sure the little guy gets back to the barracks,” I said. *He might actually be dead, though.*

Annabelle looked away, her ears bright red. “P-please forget what he said about dressin’ prim or whatever.”

“Hey, I didn’t hear or see a thing.”

“Hmm. Good.”

Annabelle left, saying she’d swing by to purchase some giant minimizer once we’d stocked it, since it’d proven useful.

I wonder whether Doz will get home alive.

A few days later, Doz slinked into the store. His height was back to normal, but he was wearing a disguise. “Sell me that giant minimizer stuff, Reiji.”

“No way. You’ll just do something creepy again, won’t you?”

Doz shrugged. Apparently, he didn’t regret his actions at all. “With a bottle of that, it’d be easy to glimpse the captain in the bath, or changin’, or—”

“Think again, you damn pervert!” *No wonder Annabelle treats him the way she does.*

“That giant minimizer’s great for peepin’ Toms!” he insisted.

Sure, but couldn’t you phrase that in a less gross way?

Thanks to guys like Doz, Kirio Drugs sold giant minimizer to Annabelle exclusively.

Chapter 11:

Even Monsters Can Get Hurt

BOOM. Thwump. Slam!

I could hear loud noises outside the drugstore. *Must be Noela and Griffy.*

“What’re those sounds, Reiji?” Vivi asked, looking nervous.

“Noela’s been playing kind of rough with Griffy lately.”

“It’s Li’l Kyuu and Noela, huh?” That seemed to be enough explanation for Vivi; she didn’t ask anything else.

I should go talk to them in case they scare off customers. They were “playing,” as I said—but to an outsider, that’d look like a white wolf fighting a griffin to the death.

“Kyuu! Kyuuuuu?!” I heard Griffy screech.

Huh? What’s going on? I turned to Vivi. “Could you watch the store?”

She nodded.

I headed outside to the green space where Noela and Griffy always played. There, I saw Griffy kneeling—probably exhausted—and Noela back in her human form.

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

“M-Master, not Noela. Not Noela!” the werewolf girl cried.

What’s “not Noela”?

“Kyuu...” Griffy whined.

Looking closely at the griffin, I noticed scratch marks all over its body. *Those look really painful.* “Noela...”

I wasn’t sure what the circumstances had been, but she must’ve wound up scratching Griffy while they played. This felt like one of those situations where everyone got real quiet because a kid had accidentally poked their playmate in

the eye.

“Garoo... Griffy okay?”

“Kyu...”

Noela stroked Griffy’s head gently, then seemed to realize something.

“Potion, Master! Give Griffy tasty potion!”

I smacked her head lightly. “You understand that this only happened because you were too rough, right?”

“Groo...”

Noela seemed to regret injuring Griffy, so there was nothing more for me to say on the subject. Telling them to wait, I grabbed some potions from the drugstore and then headed back. “Here, Griffy. Drink this, and you’ll feel better.”

Noela nodded intently as I lifted the drink to the griffin’s mouth. Griffy opened its beak a little, and I poured in the potion.

“Tasty taste tasty, Griffy?”

Noela really wants Griffy’s opinion on the potion’s flavor.

“Kyu!” Griffy responded energetically, but its wounds didn’t heal.

Is the potion not working? When Noela first drank one in her wolf form, I thought it’d cured her immediately. “Hey, Noela. Remember how I gave you a potion when we first met? Did it heal you right away?”

“Yeah! Still hurt some, but felt better.”

When Doz had injured his leg the other day, I had him drink a potion, and he was back on his feet. “The drugstore’s potions *are* meant for humans, not monsters,” I muttered.

Maybe, just like adults and children had to take different doses of the same medicine to benefit from it, a large body like a griffin’s needed a different potion strength.

“It might be time to create a monster-exclusive potion,” I concluded.

“M-monster exclusive?”

“In other words, a new kind of potion.”

“New tasty taste?!” Noela was overjoyed.

I still wasn’t sure whether the potion had been less effective because Griffy was a griffin or just because its body was so large. “Can you chug three more potions, Griffy?”

“Kyuu.” It opened its beak again for me. I grabbed a few potions—including the one Noela was on the verge of drinking—and poured them into Griffy’s mouth. “Kyuu!”

“No fair,” Noela objected.

“It’s perfectly fair.”

Griffy seems to regain its energy, but its wounds still looked rough. I palpated them. *Poke. Poke.*

“Kyuuooough?!”

They definitely still hurt. *Yup, of course they do.* “The drugstore’s potions aren’t strong enough for monsters—at least, not monsters the size of Griffy,” I explained to Noela.

“Make sense. Noela not monster. Potion work.” Since Noela was a werewolf, she was partially human.

“Guess I’ll make a new potion.”

“Noela help Master! Taste test.”

I figured she’d say that.

Noela bowed her head. “Griffy, Noela sorry.” She probably felt a bit guilty about the griffin’s injuries.

“Kyuu. Kyuu.” Griffy didn’t seem the least bit bothered. It looked kind of blasé, if anything. We returned our loyal griffin to its stable, then headed to the lab to start.

My official taste tester, Noela, stared at my work with a grave face. “Tasty taste beyond. *Beyond* tasty taste.”

“No, the new potion will taste normal.” I’d obviously add some different

ingredients, but the other ingredients—and the potion’s effects—would be the same, so the flavor wouldn’t change much.

“Garoo?!”

With Noela’s help, I completed the new potion.

Monster Potion: Potion for monsters. Speeds up healing.

“New beyond tasty taste!”

“Nope. The flavor will be basically the same,” I reminded her. *We should get this to Griffy ASAP.*

“Give to Noela. Noela give to Griffy.”

“You bet.”

Noela trotted toward the exit, sniffing the potion bottle. She seemed immensely curious about the new concoction.

Something about how she’s acting is mighty suspicious. “Don’t drink any on the way.”

“Arroo?!” Noela turned toward me silently, shocked that she’d been found out.

With a heavy sigh, I found someone to chaperone her. “Hey, Vivi, mind watching Noela to make sure she doesn’t drink that?”

“Uh-huh!” Vivi turned to her friend. “You’ll get fat if you drink that potion, Noela!”

That’s not true at all!

Vivi’s threat didn’t bother the werewolf girl. “No get fat.”

Despite Noela’s claim, I seemed to remember her temporarily putting weight on not long ago. *Did she already forget?*

Vivi and Noela headed for Griffy’s stable, chitchatting. I decided just to get a report on how my new potion worked from them. If my skill had described it

accurately, there shouldn't be any issues.

There were tons of products and treatments intended specifically for people with certain jobs or lifestyles—for instance, medicine that was only useful to farmers. Only a few people would need monster potions, but I could already name someone who did.

Just as I was thinking about her, the monster tamer Eva popped in. “Hey, Mr. Pharmacist!”

Since I'd first created a new product for her, Eva had come to Kirio Drugs frequently. Now that she was a regular, I let my guard down around her.

“Welcome,” I said. “What's up?”

“That asshole complains about how I fight!”

I'm assuming she means the centaur she partnered with. Theoretically, the Translator DX helped Eva and the centaur communicate, but it seemed to be causing issues too.

“Look, I get it. I mess up too,” Eva continued. “But how dare he be like, ‘Act more feminine!’ and ‘Show me your panties!’ He's the *worst!*”

Sexual harassment, bullying... I guess she's seeing her monster warts and all. Makes you wonder about the pros and cons of being able to communicate. From what the centaur had said to Eva, it was apparently a little too smart for its own good.

“I was totally done with him. I couldn't do it.” Eva pouted. “I nullified our pact and released him.”

Eva usually hit me with these complaints when she dropped in. If the centaur was gone, though, I figured today was the end of that.

“He made fun of me constantly,” she added. “‘If you ain't got healing magic, learn some!’ ‘You call yourself my tamer? Bwa ha ha! You're killing me!’ I swear, he was stress personified!”

She sounds like an office lady complaining about her boss. Honestly, she had perfect timing. I showed her an extra bottle of the heavy-duty potion I'd made. “Know what this is?”

“A potion, right?”

“Not just that. It’s a *monster* potion!”

When Eva first showed up, I’d heard Vivi, Noela, and Griffy gushing outside:

“Wow! It healed Li’l Kyuu right away!”

“Garoo!”

“Kyuu! Kyuu!”

So I already knew the monster potion was effective.

“A monster potion...” Eva repeated. “With this, I wouldn’t have to learn healing magic, would I?”

“Nope. But, well, you already let your familiar go, so you can use this for your next one.”

Eva clasped my hand tightly and shook it. “You’re really superhuman, Mr. Pharmacist! A monster-taming visionary!”

Oh, man. I’m revolutionizing yet another field?

Once she was done complaining, Eva bought several items, including monster potions. Then she left the drugstore, excited to find a new partner. Maybe she was tired of monsters insulting her; one thing she *hadn’t* purchased was Translator DX.

“Communication’s never easy, is it?” I said to myself.

Chapter 12:

Compost

I WAS ON SHOP DUTY when Noela trotted in with a broom, a hand over her nose. She was covered in filth and smelled terrible. She usually smelled quite nice, so that was shocking.

“Deodorizer stop working, Master,” she told me.

“Gah! Didn’t I tell you not to come in here if you’re cleaning Griffy’s stable?!”

That wasn’t just because the drugstore was a hassle to clean. The last time this had happened, we actually had a customer. When they saw and smelled Noela, they’d angrily lectured *me*—a man in his twenties—about hygiene. It was extremely depressing.

“Deodorizer stop working,” Noela repeated.

“Fine! Okay! I’ll bring more later!” *Thank goodness no customers are around.*

“Uh-huh.” I sighed in relief as Noela headed back to Griffy’s stable.

Later on, Mina asked me, “Oh...did Noela come in while she was cleaning the stable again?” She knew about that awful incident with the angry customer, and she immediately recognized the filth and smell at the drugstore entrance.

“Apparently, the deodorizer stopped working,” I replied.

“She could just have told you so after.” Mina offered a pained smile. “That deodorizer’s incredible, but it doesn’t stand a chance when it comes to Griffy’s, um, you-know-what.”

I know. Griffy’s stable was cleaned regularly. Noela generally took charge, but Mina and I tidied it now and then.

The deodorizer, which was quite effective against smelly plants and toilets, was the reason Noela could bear cleaning the stable at all. But—while the deodorizer certainly negated it a bit—dung was always smelly. And if you put something with a nice aroma nearby, the combined scent wound up extra unpleasant.

“What about changing Griffy’s diet?” Mina suggested.

“How so?”

“Griffy eats lots of meat. How about feeding it more fruit?”

“Hmm. You think eating so much strong-smelling food makes Griffy’s dung stinkier?”

“Mm-hmm!”

Griffy usually ate cuts of horse, lamb, cow, and pig that humans didn’t like. Mina got them from the town butcher most of the time. In general, the griffin ate everything we gave it—it was a true omnivore, and the bones we considered huge were crunchy little morsels to Griffy.

“Let’s give it a shot,” I agreed.

“All right. I’ll visit the farmers and see if I can get any unsellable fruit.”

Time was of the essence, so Mina set off right away. It didn’t seem like we’d have a customer anytime soon, so I headed to the stable to help Noela.

I could hear her sweeping. “In way, Griffy!”

“Kyu!”

Sounds like she’s treating this seriously. Good girl.

“If only you were more human when it came to *that*,” I whispered as I spotted Griffy.

Griffy cocked its head, watching me with its big, cute eyes. “Kyu?”

Griffy’s a monster, though. It’s not its fault.

As we cleaned the stable, we put Griffy’s dung in a hole. Once we were done, we covered it up.

Griffin Dung: Griffy’s excrement.

Yup. Thanks for that.

Mina worked hard; she came home with tons of damaged fruit unfit for sale or human consumption. Going forward, Griffy's diet would consist primarily of fruit; we'd only feed meat to the griffin occasionally. *We might've been giving it too much meat just because it's a monster.*

When Noela entered the stable on the next cleaning day, it didn't have the same awful scent as before. "Noela fine, Master!"

"Glad to hear it."

Since we'd switched Griffy's diet, the deodorizer had started working as it was meant to. Griffy, on the other hand, seemed unchanged. *Thank goodness. All's well that ends well.*

When I peeked into the hole in the stable, however, something *was* different.

Griffin Dung: Griffy's excrement. Compost base.

That's new. Compost is, uh, that stuff for fertilizer, right?

My identification skill had said "compost base," so I assumed griffin dung was a fertilizer ingredient. *If things pan out, I can actually give those farmers a thank-you gift.*

I headed for the lab and followed my medicine-making skill's instructions.

Natural Food Source: Ferments livestock dung, converting it to fertilizer.

With that new product, I could make crop fertilizer from Griffy's dung. Taking the bottle of natural food source to the stable, I discovered Noela getting ready to fill in the hole. "Ack! Hold up!"

"Groo?" She looked at me, confused.

I explained the situation, but it only seemed to confuse her even more.

“Arroooo?!”

“I’m basically going to turn Griffy’s dung into something good.”

“Noela no believe. Stinky.”

“I mean, I guess it won’t be beneficial to you,” I admitted.

Time to give it a try. I poured the natural food source into the hole full of dung, mixing them together with a stick. The hole’s contents seemed less rancid than before.

“Groo?” Noela peeked curiously into the hole.

Don’t you dare fall in!

Fermented Griffin Dung: Fertilizer. Promotes root growth when added to soil.

Whoo! Nailed it! Griffy fertilizer. I’ll get the farmers who gave us damaged fruit to try this out.

“Griffy, I need you to poop a lot going forward.”

Griffy’s eyes widened. “Kyu?”

I called Mina into the stable and explained the fertilizer to her.

Even she seemed skeptical. “You mean, this fertilizer is Griffy’s...stuff?”

“Uh-huh. How about we test it on our meadow?” I suggested. I’d feel bad if it didn’t work as intended, so I figured I’d give it a trial run.

Shoveling the fertilizer into a bucket, I headed to the nearby meadow of herbs. The patch we’d just harvested was a perfect spot; I scooped up the fertilizer and mixed the stuff into the dirt. That was apparently all you had to do, so I then scattered some seeds on top. *I hope this goes well.*

The next morning, I left the store to Ejil and Vivi and headed to the meadow with Mina and Noela.

Noela, wearing her straw hat, poked at a new seedling. “Master, sprout!”

“Whoa! Already?”

“Mr. Reiji, is that what I think it is?”

“Yup! It’s the patch I fertilized.” *I figured the fermented griffin dung would speed up the seeds’ growth, but not by this much.* The new product would be pretty useful.

Heading over to some farmers working nearby, I told them about the griffin dung fertilizer.

“You made somethin’ like that, Mr. Pharmacist?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s basically just a byproduct of owning a griffin.”

“By the way, how much will it cost?”

“Oh, I’m not charging any money,” I told my farmer friends. “I don’t need the ingredients to begin with. Anyone who wants some fermented griffin dung can just drop by the drugstore!”

The next day, there was a lengthy line of farmers outside the store. Noela and Griffy seemed displeased by this turn of events.

“Weird.” Noela frowned. “People want poop. Noela no need.”

“Kyu.”

Regardless, we’d be eating delicious fruits and veggies come the next harvest.

Chapter 13:

Making the Tastiest of Tasties

IN HIS BEDROOM in the demon king's castle, Ejil compared a potion he'd made to one from the drugstore.

"It's completely unlike the good doctor's. But why?" He rubbed his chin. "The ingredients are the same. Why are they so different?"

The demon king had once ordered his army's doctor to create a similar potion, but it had also turned out differently. In fact, it'd been disgusting—a far cry from the tasty beverage Noela so enjoyed.

Ejil sniffed his homemade potion. "No scent. And it's flavorless!"

He'd watched the pharmacist make potions countless times, but when Ejil himself shook the bottle at the end of the process, nothing happened. He'd gotten the measurements down to a T—even the water—but Ejil's potion was barely medicine. Its effects were, at best, hard to detect.

The demon king cocked his head. "Could the doctor be less a pharmacist and more a witch?" But perhaps it made no sense for a man to be a witch.

Ejil had suspected that Kirio Drugs' potion bottles possessed some secret benefit, but it turned out that the doctor bought bulk orders of standard bottles from Kalta's general store. Still, the demon king wondered if there might be *one* unique magic bottle. Maybe the pharmacist used that for mixing, then poured the contents into standard bottles.

"Heh heh heh... Ha ha ha! Bwa ha ha ha! I finally understand! I've seen through your tricks and arrived at the truth, you cheating pharmacist! Next time I work, I've got to ask him to let me use that magic bottle!"



Ejil checked his calendar to see when his next shift was. Fortunately, it was the following day. Cackling, the demon king tucked himself into bed.

The next day, Ejil showed up to work on time as usual. “Good morning!”

Having teleported in, he was a bit breathless, but Reiji had told him many moons ago that “Greeting people when you arrive at work is a must.” So, Ejil obeyed.

“Hey. Morning, Ejil,” Reiji replied as he cleaned the store.

Noela also greeted the demon king, albeit quietly, while restocking a shelf. Reiji had given her a hard time, so Noela had finally started returning Ejil’s greetings. It was clear to everyone that she only did it because her master told her to, but any response made Ejil happy.

“Noela...” Ejil breathed. Her silky silver hair... The way her bewitching tail swayed... Ejil could’ve watched her forever.

“You’re grinning, Ejil.”

“That’s normal.”

“If so, it’s a problem.” Reiji’s calm straight-man schtick was on point as always.

Since Noela was restocking, Ejil checked the drugstore’s change at the register. When he’d first started working at Kirio Drugs, he’d found counting the change every day annoying. Really, though, the drugstore ran out of small coins frequently.

“We’ve got enough change, Doctor.”

“Gotcha.”

“Potions okay, Master! Lots now,” Noela reported with a victorious look and a nod.

“What’d I tell you about just restocking the potions, fluffball? Check over *everything*.”

“Groo?”

Ejil coughed pointedly. “I wouldn’t mind helping.”

Checklist in hand, Ejil walked through the drugstore, counting the stock. An employee did that every day before the drugstore opened and after it closed. If a product was low, someone would grab more from the backstock in the lab.

After restocking where necessary, Ejil, Reiji, and Noela were finished.

“All set, Doctor!”

“Thanks, Ejil.”

“No worries!”

Noela flashed Ejil a glare.

“What’s wrong, Noela?” To Ejil’s confusion, she shook her head, snorting.

Reiji simply chuckled. “Noela’s envious that I thanked you, not her.”

“I can’t believe it! Envious of *me*?”

“Master wrong! Noela no envious!” Even in a foul mood, Noela was adorable.

Once the drugstore was prepped to open, Reiji told Noela and Ejil the day’s schedule. “Today, I’m harvesting stuff from the meadow and restocking the lab. You two need to manage the store while I’m gone.”

“Together, Master? Noela and Ejil?”

“Yeah. Mina’s coming to the meadow with me.”

“Groo...”

“I’m working alone with Noela?!” Although he’d said the words aloud, they nonetheless echoed in Ejil’s heart. Noela quickly hid behind Reiji, distancing herself from the demon king.

Reiji patted the werewolf girl on the head gently. “Play nice.” The words were more directed at Noela than Ejil. She nodded, despite her very clear unhappiness with her predicament.

“What a perfect opportunity. I can secretly *utilize* the magic bottle that *produces* the doctor’s underhanded potions!” Ejil muttered under his breath, suppressing a foul laugh.

“All right, Ejil. You’re on shop duty.”

“Certainly!”

“Give Noela duty too, Master!”

“Okay, okay. You’re also on shop duty.”

“Groo! Certainly!”

As Ejil said a polite goodbye to Reiji, Noela left for Griffy’s stable.

“Noela! Didn’t the good doctor just ask you to watch the drugstore?”

She’d gone out of her way to have Reiji assign her drugstore duty, yet she’d up and slipped away.

“She’s truly a free spirit,” Ejil sighed.

After a while, Noela returned, seemingly thunderstruck by an incredible revelation. “Noela looking forward to morning potion! Master forget!”

“Ahem! Noela, what say I make you a fresh potion just like the good doctor’s?”

“Arroo?!” She balked, assuming he was deceiving her.

“They’re quite simple, you see,” Ejil insisted.

“If trespass in lab, Master mad.”

“No one’s ever gotten mad at me.”

Noela hesitated.

“Ha ha ha! The good doctor probably loses his temper because you always forget to clean up after yourself, Noela. I, however, do not, and he trusts me completely and utterly!”

“Garoo...”

“Hm? Why do you look so annoyed?”

When Reiji went to the meadow, he usually returned just before lunch. Ejil had plenty of time. Fortunately, no customers were present at the moment. If he and Noela didn’t sneak into the lab, they’d likely pass the morning loafing around in the store.

“If the good doctor doesn’t notice we went inside his lab, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Ejil insisted.

“Noela tell Master.”

“But why?!”

“Kill trust in Ejil.”

“That’s your goal? You’re quite a villainess! On the other hand, Noela...” Ejil cackled, then grinned at her. “What will you do if I *succeed* at making your potion?”

The werewolf girl scoffed. “Same thing.”

“I’m talking about your favorite, Noela! Potions, the tastiest of tasties!”

“Groo? Master make Noela potions no problem.”

“But didn’t you say you haven’t had one this morning?”

“No problem. Sneak from backstock.”

“Aha! Stealing potions when you enter the good doctor’s lab is what so upsets him, Noela!”

Even Noela sensed this to be true.

“However,” Ejil continued, “I can enter and leave the lab freely without leaving a trail. Which means...what?”

“Ejil make potion...and Master no angry?”

“Precisely! And the backstock shall remain the same!”

Finally realizing what Ejil was getting at, Noela trembled. “Arroo...”

“Heh heh heh. Have you finally seen the appeal of *my* potions, Noela? They’re neither on sale in the drugstore nor written on the backstock list!”

Ejil’s demonic whisper had Noela on the verge of falling from grace. “N-not like *you* can make potion,” she objected. “Tasty taste is Master only!”

“Shall we test that theory?”

“Noela know nothing, hear nothing, see nothing!” Apparently, the werewolf girl would remain quiet about Ejil’s trespassing.

“Heh! You’re quite a troublemaker.” Ejil’s cape billowed as he left for the lab. There, he cackled wildly. “Heh heh heh...today is the last day I acknowledge you as my superior, Dr. Reiji! Now, where’s the magic bottle—the magibottle?!”

Ejil still suspected that Reiji used a specific “magibottle” to brew potions; he assumed that this artifact had made Reiji the cheating pharmacist he was.

The demon king’s chortling continued as he searched. “Now I know the good doctor’s secret—his weakness, even. And since Noela listens to him, I can easily make her mine by blackmailing him and controlling him from the shadows!”

The magibottle! Ejil thought, picking it up. “This is it!”

It was a regular bottle at first glance, but when making medicine, it would shine radiantly.

“I wonder where the good doctor obtained such a peculiar magic tool.” His army would benefit from owning one.

Cackling some more, Ejil gathered the required ingredients. The lab’s owner wouldn’t return from the herb meadow for a while, and neither would the noisy Mina. Following the steps he’d watched Reiji complete many times, Ejil mixed exactly the same potion. “All that’s left is to shake the magibot—”

Knock. Knock.

“Gah!” Ejil’s heart nearly leapt from his chest. He approached the door cautiously.

“Master coming home!” It was Noela’s voice. “Still far, though!”

“What?!”

Reiji had probably forgotten something at the house or drugstore. Either way, this was bad. Ejil hadn’t finished the potion—and the fact that Noela had bothered informing him of Reiji’s approach might mean she was looking forward to it.

“Potion?” Noela called.

“It’s n-not finished yet. I need more time.”

“G-gotcha. Noela buy time.”

“Oh, Noela...” Ejil was touched; Noela’s helpfulness was a complete first. He had to make this potion, no matter what.

Ejil was allowed to enter Reiji’s lab, unlike Noela, but there was a chance the pharmacist might notice that Ejil had taken some ingredients. That would tell him that Ejil had discovered the magibottle.

“Now that I know his secret, he’ll probably find some excuse to fire me!” For Ejil, that would be the worst-case scenario—he’d be unable to see Noela regularly. As soon as he became a customer, rather than an employee, she’d probably never give him the time of day again.

Ejil kept shaking the bottle, but it wouldn’t glow. “Damn it! It’s *still* not done?”

Could it be that this wasn’t the magibottle? Ejil quickly transferred the potion to another container and kept shaking it.

“Ah...no go to lab, Master!” Noela was trying her best to stop Reiji, but she was awful at it.

Why did she even mention the lab? She’s giving him cause to check in, if anything!

“Noela, why must you be such a ditz?!” Ejil cried to the heavens impulsively.

“Er...why not?” he heard Reiji ask. “I forgot to write down the quantities I need. I’ve got to check the backstock.”

“N-Noela check for you!”

“Nah, that’s okay. You told me you can’t tell those ingredients apart, remember?”

“Yeah.”

Why did she agree with him?!

“Just focus on the drugstore. Wait—where’s Ejil?”

“E-Ejil...not in lab!”

She’s so terrible at this! Ejil silently cried once more. At this point, Noela might as well just have said where he was.

“I smell a rat, Noela. What’re you hiding?”

“Groo? Arroo!” Noela began to whistle innocently.

What a cliché. But still... Ejil cringed. “Noela’s doing her worst—I mean, best—to buy me time, and yet...”

He still hadn’t found the magibottle. Noticing a third bottle, Ejil poured in the liquid and shook it. This time, it glowed. *Was that it?!*

As Ejil tiptoed out of the lab, Noela blocked Reiji’s path forward. “No go to lab, Master!”

“Why not?!”

Ejil quietly hid, tucking the magibottle inside his cape, and then slowly made his way into the drugstore. “Doctor? Noela? What’s wrong?”

“Where were you, Ejil?”

“In the bathroom.”

“Is that so?”

Noela’s eyes asked the important question—had Ejil done it? The demon king winked proudly in response.

“What signal was that?” Reiji demanded.

How’d he figure it out?! “It w-wasn’t a signal! I just love practicing my incredible winking skills!”

“Hrm.” Reiji still looked suspicious, but he didn’t say anything more. He entered the lab, and after a while, he left with his notes.

As far as Ejil could remember, he’d made sure to put everything in the lab back where it belonged. “We did it, Noela.”

“Master stubborn,” Noela replied worriedly.

“Nevertheless, I finished the potion. Thanks to you, of course.”

Noela glanced inside the magibottle, eyes sparkling. “Tasty taste done?”

“Just barely.”

“Quick! Quick! Tasty taste!”

Ejil hurriedly concealed the magibottle. “I never said anything about letting

you drink this for free.”

“Groo?”

“Either let me enjoy your tail’s fluffiness or spend our whole day off on a date with me. Pick!”

“Impossible! Both disgusting.”

“Please don’t say that. It hurts the most.”

“Quick! Tasty taste!” The werewolf girl reached out, trying to pull the potion away from Ejil.

“Noela, please sto—”

“Noela know you have! Tasty taste! Fast!”

“Stop trying to steal it!” Ejil attempted to block her hands, resulting in an awkward, grabby face-off. “You won’t get the potion if I can’t fluff your tail!”

“Potion hostage! Coward!”

“That isn’t quite right... Look, the world runs on give and take!”

The pair tussled so vigorously that the magibottle fell from inside Ejil’s cape to the floor.

“Ah!” they both cried.

Smash! The bottle exploded into shards of glass.

“Aaaaugh!” Ejil howled. “I only planned to borrow it for a little while!”

“Master’s bottle broke?! N-Noela in the clear!”

The werewolf girl dashed out of the drugstore like the wind. *Zoom!*

How would Ejil ever apologize to Reiji? Was there any point even trying? The pharmacist would never forgive him. “I was wrong to try to make my own potions and show up the doctor,” the demon king murmured, depressed. “I’m definitely fired.”

Ejil began to reflect on his fun workdays with Noela, which were surely over, but he couldn’t withstand the grief. His eyes rolled backward, and he passed out.

Feeling someone shake his body, the demon king awakened.

“Ejil? Are you all right?” It was Mina; she’d returned from the meadow.

“What do you want, woman?!”

“Is that any way to greet someone?” Mina sighed. “You passed out in the hallway.”

Just then, Ejil remembered his predicament—the splattered potion and broken magibottle’s remnants were still on the drugstore floor.

“I-If only I could put it back together, then I...” he mumbled to himself. This was his all-or-nothing chance to turn things around.

“What’s the matter, Ejil? Did you drop a product?”

“D-Doctor?!” The demon king nearly jumped out of his shoes.

“Sorry, Mina—could you grab a rag?”

“Certainly. One moment.”

“D-Doctor...um...that wasn’t a drugstore product. It was the magibottle.”

Ejil had created that name himself, so of course, Reiji had no idea what he meant. “The hell’s a magibottle?” he asked, picking up chunks of shattered glass. “Are you okay?”

“Doctor, how can you be so kind? I-I’ve done something unforgivable!” Racked by guilt, Ejil was on the verge of tears.

“Noela’s playing hooky again, huh? Where’d she get off to?”

“If we fixed the magibottle, couldn’t you keep using it?”

“No need to fix it. It’s not like I could sell it now anyway, and we’ve got plenty of bottles.”

“P-plenty?!” *Does that mean magibottles are produced en masse?! Does he get them from a general store with a witch on-site? But...if so, anyone who bought bottles there could cheat and become an effortlessly skilled pharmacist!*

“I never guessed you’d be so worked up over a single bottle, Ejil,” Reiji added.

“Jeez, Noela could learn a lot from you. She never feels guilty—just makes excuses.” He threw the pieces of the shattered bottle into the trash.

“Isn’t it thanks to that bottle that you can create products?”

“No way. A bottle’s a bottle.”

“R-right.”

Ejil ran his finger across some of the spilled potion in the hallway, then licked it. “Ugh! Disgusting!” The bottle had just contained dirt-and herb-flavored water.

“In retrospect, the way the magibottle glowed was much different from usual,” the demon king mused. “It was more like sunlight reflecting *off* the bottle.”

Since no magibottle could help Ejil cheat and become an incredible pharmacist, he was terribly relieved that Noela hadn’t drunk his potion.

Chapter 14:

A Mysterious Request

THE LAST TIME I'd checked the request box was during that whole "black potion" thing; it'd been a while. When I realized how long I'd left it sitting, I went to open it up.

"Still, I doubt anyone's dropping requests in this thing," I muttered.

The rectangular box was about the size of a sheet of writing paper. I shook it and heard something.

"Wait, there's a note in here?" I turned the box upside down, and much to my surprise, several requests fell out. "That's more than I expected."

Having finished her chores, Noela came up to me, tilting her head in confusion. "What, Master?"

"Oh, these? They're product requests customers wrote."

"Product requests!" Noela grabbed the notepad and pen beside the box and started writing. "Po..."

Yup, she was writing down "potions."

"We already carry those, Noela."

"Groo?"

Apparently, the werewolf girl didn't quite understand how the request box worked. I'd created it so female customers could ask for products they felt uncomfortable speaking to me about. According to Mina, women needed stuff that was awkward to mention to men.

When I thought about it, about half the drugstore's customers were women buying goods specifically for women; we had our fair share of those, after all. The request box was also meant to collect customers' opinions on our selection.

"What kind of requests did we get?" I murmured.

"Hurry, Master! Hurry!"

The request notes were neatly folded, so it was impossible to see inside one without opening it.

“Well, let’s start with this.” I grabbed a random note and unfolded it.

“I love you!” it read.

Who in the world...? Anyway, sorry, but the request box isn’t for that kind of thing. Man, I went out of my way to put instructions beside it and everything. I set the love letter aside. Rejected!

“Request box get love letter already, Master?”

“That it did.”

“Noela also love Master.”

“Thanks a million.” I stroked Noela’s head gently. *How could I lose my patience with this girl?*

“Noela open next one.”

“Be my guest, Trooper Noela.”

“Groo?” She cocked her head and then looked at the letter in her hands.

It began, “If you’re reading this, I’m no longer of this world...”

“What the hell?!” I cried. *What’s with this?! Was the writer going to die? Have they already died?! Did they misplace it? What happened?!*

“Groo... Sad tale,” Noela said with a quiet sigh.

“What was going through their head?” I muttered, grabbing the note from Noela’s hands. Since we had no clue who’d penned it, or who its recipient was supposed to be, I tossed it into the “declined” pile on top of the rejected love letter. “Noela, next, please.”

“Groo! Arroorroo! This one!” Noela grabbed a note—but then her face fell.

“What’s wrong?”

“Bad feeling.”

From the note? Let’s see.

I unfolded the paper and read the words “NOELA, BABY, I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE,

LOVE YOU!”

I know who this is from.

I was about to throw it in the trash, rather than the “declined” pile, when Noela hurried next to the garbage can. “Hey! Master!”

“Catch, Noela!” I tossed her the wadded-up note.

“Got it!” Grabbing the paper ball, she hurled it into the trash. “Whew!” She wiped sweat from her forehead. “Evil destroyed.”

“What a sad note to come across.” *That’s what he gets.*

Noela returned to my side. We high-fived and then collected ourselves. “Noela next!”

“Okay.”

She grabbed the next note, reading it silently, then cocked her head. “Groo? Mystery. Noela no understand.”

“It’s mysterious?”

I got her to show me the note, which read, “Just thinking about those times makes my chest tight. How can I cure that? Whenever I see a conversation with another woman, I’m jealous!”

“Noela want know writer.”

A young lady you’re quite close to. “This isn’t a box for love letters,” I repeated. *Rejected, needless to say. Come on, people! Read the instructions beside the request box!*

“Noela want read rest, Master!”

“You want to what?!”

These aren’t chapters of a novel! Begrudgingly, I handed her the note, and Noela kept reading with great curiosity.

“Wait...that’s right. This world doesn’t have novels or manga,” I said to myself. It was probably rare for someone to write out their inner turmoil so clearly.

The two of us kept going through the request box.

“Are you hiring full-time, and do you offer travel compensation?” a note asked.

No on both counts.

It continued, “Also, does the drugstore have a system for promoting part-timers to full-time?”

I see you, Vivi. You wrote this note so formally, you almost hoodwinked me. I put Vivi’s note on the “declined” pile. Rejected, obviously.

The next note said, “You must be bored as heck to read this, Rei Rei! Legit hilarious. LOL!”

Shut up! Noela and I will barge into the tool shop with loaded erasers!

“When I ask what he’d like for a meal, he always responds ‘Anything is fine!’” the next note read. “That’s the worst answer he could give, so I wish he’d stop. It’s quite a problem!”

This note’s totally about me...which means it’s from Mina. I’m really sorry, Mina... I’ll think harder from now on!

The next folded paper in the request box said “Kyu! Kyuu!”

How did Griffy even write this?!

The next note read, “Potion tasty today, Master! Thank you!”

Just like that, I felt warm and fuzzy. *Noela, you darn fluffy little fluffball!* I ruffled her tail and hair without thinking. *She’s so soft!*

“Garrooooo?”

After rejuvenating myself, I kept opening the remaining notes. They were still all over the map.

“Not a single product request,” I muttered. *Does nobody read instructions around here?! I guess I can’t complain. This is killing time.*

“Here, Master.” Noela handed me the final note.

“Another weird ‘request’?”

The werewolf girl shook her head gravely.

Curious, I looked down and read, “Please save my mommy.” I froze.

“What do, Master?”

“I...don’t know.” This was as serious as it got.

There were only four words, so I had no clue who the note was from. But it definitely seemed to have been penned by a kid who wasn’t used to writing yet. The letters barely qualified as such. I had no way of discerning whether this was some prank or the real deal. Several kids dropped by the drugstore occasionally to play with Noela and Vivi; was the note from one of them?

“Hmm... Hold on.” Not counting Paula, people usually came to the drugstore to buy medicine or treatments. *What was in that first note we read? Here it is.*

“If you’re reading this, I’m no longer of this world...” The note was in a woman’s soft handwriting.

Is this just a coincidence?

I didn’t remember a sickly woman dropping by the drugstore. If I’d seen one, I wouldn’t have bothered her. I wasn’t a doctor, so I couldn’t provide a checkup; I’d have no clue why she was sick. In fact, I frequently explained that to customers who didn’t understand. It was possible I’d told the woman who wrote this note the same thing—actually, I probably had. If she’d passed away, I wouldn’t be surprised if her children blamed me.

Since I’d turned the request box upside down, I’d read the notes in reverse order. That meant the child wrote their note before their mother. *If she’s still around, could I do anything to help cure her?*

“Might as well look into it.” With the child’s note in hand, I headed for the lab.

There, Noela hugged my shoulders, peering down at my hands. “What make, Master?”

“Something for a detective.”

“Groo... ‘Dee tech tive’?” She cocked her head.

Right—I forgot. Detectives don’t exist in this world. Even if they did, they wouldn’t work in little towns in the boondocks.

My bottle glowed as usual. “All right! Done.”

Lesseeit: Renders water and oil residue visible.

This should help us figure out who wrote that note.

“Groo? No understand, Master.”

“I know.” I spread some lesseeit on the bottle I’d just touched. “Take a look.”

Small, light-blue crests appeared on the bottle’s surface. Judging by their thickness, I guessed that they were thumb and index fingerprints.

“Arroo! Master’s hand?!”

“Yup. Those are called ‘fingerprints.’”

“Noela try too!” She started touching tons of stuff and then spread lesseeit over all of it. Her fingerprints appeared immediately. “Groo! Noela’s fingers! Same mazes!”

Those aren’t mazes, they’re fingerprints.

“So, now that we know which fingerprints are yours and mine, what do you think’s next?” I asked Noela.

“Note! Note!”

“Bingo.” I spread lesseeit on either side of the note.

Noela watched next to me, excited. “Master! Glow!”

Actually, three sets of fingerprints were glowing. I identified Noela’s and my own, then a set of child-sized prints. “Just what I expected,” I murmured.

Wait. There aren’t any preschools or elementary schools in Kalta. But if this kid can write, they’re getting an education. Mina and Noela wrote things occasionally, but nothing difficult, and they made tons of mistakes.

“So we’re looking for a kid from a wealthy family who visited the drugstore recently.” Not many moms brought their kids to Kirio Drugs, and I had no clue who’d left the prints. Even if the child had come in with their parents, there

were too many customers to remember.

“Sir Reiji? Noela? I’m here!”

Speaking of kids from wealthy families...

“Drills!” Noela left the lab to greet Elaine. I followed.

“Good day, Sir Reiji, Noela!”

“Hi, Drills!”

“Hey, Elaine. Perfect timing.”

“What do you mean?” I showed Elaine the note, explaining what happened, and she teared up. “How sad! The child’s mother is ill?! No doubt they came here to find medicine to cure her!”

“Do you have any idea who they could be, Elaine?”

She thought to herself, then shook her head. “I haven’t the slightest. But I must say, for someone so young, the child has pretty handwriting. Their parents must be aristocrats or wealthy provisioners.”

“Pro visioners. Sound strong.” Noela nodded as though she knew what Elaine was talking about.

“That just means ‘people who sell stuff,’ Noela.”

I figured Elaine was on the right track. A child would need to know how to read and write to inherit that kind of family business.

The young aristocrat turned to me. “If this woman’s alive, Sir Reiji, please...”

“Yeah. I plan to do everything I can.”

“That’s my Sir Reiji!”

Noela shook her head. “Not Drills’s. Noela’s.”

Really? You’re going to argue over that?

Just when I was about to leave to look into the child’s identity, Elaine offered to help. I had no reason to decline, so I gladly welcomed her to the team.

“Let’s ask around town in case their parents *are* provisioners or merchants,” I suggested.

“Go, go, go!” Noela was all fired up.

I told Mina we’d be gone for a while, and we took Elaine’s carriage into town.

Obviously, showing a bunch of people some random fingerprints wouldn’t get us anywhere. To start, we would search for a literate child with a sick mother. We’d use the fingerprints to determine whether someone fit the bill.

Noela, Elaine, and I asked around the town square, searching for leads, but we had no luck.

“Do you think perhaps they don’t live in town?” Elaine asked.

“Hard to say. Hey, Elaine...is there a doctor in Kalta?” I’d always found it strange, but first-timers at Kirio Drugs often *did* think I was a physician.

“Not right now. When someone gets sick, they have to visit the next town over.”

“No wonder people keep treating me like a doctor.”

I didn’t practice medicine, so even if someone consulted me about symptoms, I couldn’t really treat them. At most, I’d suggest a product like cold or stomach medicine; I couldn’t hand them a miracle cure or anything. But if I found this sick woman, I didn’t want to tell her, “Well, nothing I can do!”

We eventually bumped into the traveling merchant Vin, and I explained the situation to him.

“The fact that you don’t remember this child and their mother suggests it’s possible that they aren’t from Kalta,” Vin said. “Folks who don’t normally come to town... A merchant family with a young child and a sick mother...” He seemed to have someone in mind. “You must be looking for Mr. Hautbeaux from the next town over.”

“Mr. Hautbeaux?”

“Yup. His wife fell terribly sick not long ago. They’ve got a baby and a little girl who can write.”

“That must be them!” Elaine said.

“Must! Must!” Noela echoed.

I calmed the pair down. “Hold your horses, girls. We don’t know for sure yet.”

“Yup. That’s all gossip,” Vin agreed. “Mrs. Hautbeaux may have recovered.”

Either way, we had our first clue. *Time to go confirm this.* I thanked Vin, and then Elaine, Noela, and I took Elaine’s carriage to the neighboring town.

Truth be told, our destination wasn’t much bigger than Kalta. It wasn’t a one-horse town, but it wasn’t bustling either.

According to Vin, the Hautbeaux family ran multiple shops—a greengrocer, a general store, and even a weapon shop. To use my old world’s terminology, they were a conglomerate.

We drove Elaine’s carriage to the Hautbeauxs’ residence. It wasn’t big enough to call a mansion, but it was still larger than average. I spotted a little girl playing by the front gate. *Is she the one?*

Hopping out of the carriage, I cautiously called out to her. “Good day! I run a pharmacy in Kalta called Kirio Drugs.”

“Kirio Drugs?” she repeated.

I showed her the note. “Did you write this?” She looked at me and then the note. “Is your mommy sick?” I asked.

“The doctor said so.”

To identify the girl for sure, I handed her a bottle I’d brought and then applied lesseeit to it. Noela and Elaine popped up to compare the prints on the bottle to those on the note.

“Mazes same.”

“Yes, the mazes *are* the same!”

Fingerprints, people. Let’s work on our vocabularies. Anyway, that means...

Having seen Elaine’s lavish carriage, a plump man in his late thirties exited the house and approached us. “What business do you have with my daughter?”

This guy must be Mr. Hautbeaux. “I’m a pharmacist from Kalta. I received this note in my request box, so I’m looking into it. May I have a moment of your time?”

Mr. Hautbeaux looked at the note, nodded, and led us into his home.

In the reception room, we listened as he somberly explained the note. “I’ve brought my daughter along to Kalta during several business trips. On top of that, we’ve been to your drugstore. She must’ve written that request during one of those visits.”

Mr. Hautbeaux and his wife had stopped by Kirio Drugs after hearing rumors of my skill, hoping to purchase medicine that would cure her, but to no avail. “She’s visited our town doctor several times,” Mr. Hautbeaux continued. “He says he can’t do any more to help her.”

“Is that so?”

“My wife’s stable, but she doesn’t have long. At any rate, thank you for reading my daughter’s note and visiting us.”

He must be in immense pain, yet here he is, thanking me. My heart ached. *If the town doctor says his wife’s dying, it might be true. And I don’t have any medicine that could heal her.* At least, I didn’t right then.

I wound up visiting Mr. Hautbeaux’s wife with him and his daughter Aisha. Mrs. Hautbeaux looked tremendously kind, but her skin had a sickly pallor. Strangely, my medicine-making skill reacted before I’d even seen her.

What the heck? Once I realized what my skill was suggesting, however, it made sense.

“I have an idea, Mr. Hautbeaux,” I told him. “I’m going to create a treatment for your wife’s illness.”

“You can do that?”

“I can.” My medicine-making skill was telling me everything I needed to know about the product: ingredients, purpose, dosage, and the steps to create it.

After talking to Mrs. Hautbeaux for a while, asking her how she felt, I promised her that I’d make her a treatment. I also explained that I couldn’t

guarantee its effects.

Chapter 15:

Rare Ingredient Hunting

THE THREE HAUTBEAUXS thanked me, and I left their home.

“Are you sure you should’ve promised that, Sir Reiji?” Elaine asked in the carriage, concerned. “The town doctor couldn’t do anything more to help.”

She was absolutely right. I didn’t know if Mrs. Hautbeaux’s disease was something *this* world’s doctors couldn’t treat or if it was completely incurable.

“Master said help! So help! Master that kind of man!” Noela seemed to trust me entirely.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “As long as I have the ingredients, I can make the treatment she’ll need.”

Noela puffed out her chest as if telling Elaine, “See?!”

“What kind of treatment is it?” the young noblewoman asked.

“A panacea. It’ll do exactly what you think.”

“Wow,” Elaine whispered.

Noela repeated the word. “Panacea. Sound strong.”

It would, in fact, be very strong—the strongest medicine I’d created up to this point.

“I wish I could see this through to the end,” Elaine sighed. “You absolutely must tell me how things turn out!”

“Leave to us, Drills! Master real man. No sweat!” Noela was definitely setting a high bar.

Once the carriage dropped Noela and I off at the drugstore, I thanked Elaine and her butler and said goodbye to the pair.

“The biggest challenge now will be procuring the ingredients,” I murmured, then called, “Ejil? Ejil?! Are you here?”

“No call Ejil, Master!”

Sorry, Noela. I need him for this. Man, where is he? To be fair, he’d actually never shown up because I yelled for him.

I headed outside and tried to summon Ejil there too. Suddenly, a magic circle appeared in the air. “You called, Doctor?!”

“Whoa! You actually came!” *Says the guy who was calling him... But that’s neither here nor there.*

“I had a feeling you and Noela were summoning me.”

“Noela no summon,” the werewolf girl interjected.

“I sensed that Noela was in danger, and—”

“Noela no danger.”

“Ejil, I need the horn of a one-horned beast for my next product.”

Usually, Ejil raced off to grab the materials I required. This time, however, he frowned as I mentioned the rare ingredient. “Hmm. Unicorns are such beasts, but even my army and I couldn’t find one easily.”

“I see.” I knew the horn was a rare material; of course the creature it came from was rare too.

“I have a general sense of where you’d find a unicorn. Actually obtaining its horn would be nearly impossible, though,” Ejil continued apologetically.

“They’re incredibly bright. I doubt one would show itself quickly.”

“If you give me a sense of where to find one, that’ll be more than enough.”

“You’re sure?”

“Uh-huh. After all, the drugstore offers a beast-taming kit.” The kit included lure, millet dumpling paste, and Translator DX. *Those should prove pretty useful for this.* “Whatever it takes, I’ll get a unicorn horn.”

“All right. That’s enough out of me; I can tell you’re determined. Now, as to where to find a unicorn...” Ejil went on to explain that there was one in the forest at the base of Mt. Bizef, where we’d hiked the other day.

“Master! Noela come too! Make sure no mistake.”

“Thanks, fluffball.” I gently stroked her head, and she closed her eyes, savoring it.

“If I joined you, my aura of charisma and mighty demonic power would only impede you.” Ejil sighed. “Good luck to you both.”

He’s powerful, all right. But man, boasting like that is so like him. “Thanks, Ejil. We’ll be careful. Go get ready, Noela.”

“Groo! Mina! Lunch! Noela going with Master!” Noela headed for the kitchen immediately to tell Mina what she wanted to eat.

Does she think we’re going on a picnic? I stuffed some supplies and products we’d need—including emergency potions—into my bag. *If we’re heading to Mt. Bizef, we should get Griffy to fly there.*

“Hey, Griffy?! We’re taking a walk near Mt. Bizef, buddy.” I brought the griffin out from the stable.

Its wings flapped excitedly. “Kyu! Kyuuuu!”

Griffy’s raring to go.

“Master! Ready!” Noela popped up, her backpack overstuffed.

“Mina sure made a big lunch, huh?”

The werewolf girl hesitated.

“Look, fluffball, don’t tell me...” As I tried to check inside Noela’s bag, she turned away. From the half-open backpack tumbled a single bottle—a potion, obviously. “Your bag’s full of potions!” *I figured.*

“This crisis! *Need* potions!”

“Go put those back, and quit drinking them like they’re water! I packed emergency potions.”

“Arroo...” Noela trudged dejectedly into the drugstore, returning with a lighter bag.

Mina and Ejil saw us off as we hopped on Griffy’s back.

“Mr. Reiji, Noela, be careful!” Mina called.

“Will do,” I replied. “We’ll be back before it gets too late.”

We made haste for Mt. Bizef.

The forest was at Mt. Bizef’s base, opposite the path we’d hiked up. Lush and green, it looked like a barrier preventing humanity from entering. Looking down at it from above told me nothing.

“Wonder where this unicorn is,” I muttered.

Even Noela was stumped. “Can’t track unicorn. Don’t know smell.”

I spotted a lake where animals might gather, and we had Griffy touch down there.

“Time to bust out the lure.” I spread the stuff around the lake and then watched from afar. A horde of monsters and animals would soon congregate; hopefully, a unicorn would be among them.

The lure’s appealing aroma quickly drew out all kinds of small creatures. *I should drink some Translator DX now, just to be safe.* I sipped a bit. Noela drank some too.

“Griff’s looking forward to seeing a real live unicorn, Master!”

“We’re not just here to observe, remember?”

“Once unicorn appears, Griffy attack!” Noela ordered.

“Sure thing, Instructor!”

“Don’t listen to her! We’re not here to fight it.” I figured it’d be best if we could make nice with the unicorn, so it gave us its horn willingly. *But what if it’s got a chip on its shoulder, like that centaur Eva tried to tame?*

We dug into the lunches Mina had made us as we watched the lake from the shadows. While Griffy and Noela focused on their food, I noticed that all the animals gathered around the lure had quieted.

Noela’s ears twitched, and she set down her lunch. Even Griffy seemed to sense something; the griffin was holding its breath. They both stared at a spot where I’d spread the lure.

“Neeigh! Neeigh!” A beast slowly emerged from the bushes.

At first glance, it looked like a horse. It had blue eyes that reminded me of the sky, a golden mane, and a pure-white coat, practically blanketed in a divine aura. A single golden horn protruded from its forehead, proving that it wasn't just a horse.

One-Horned Beast: Mystical beast known as a unicorn. Only ten exist in this world. Horn is a reputed cure-all.

I-It's a real unicorn.

The creature surveyed its surroundings, looking for the source of the lure's aroma. “I smell something delightful,” it neighed.

The monsters and animals whispered among themselves.

“It's the sovereign!”

“The sovereign's come!”

“How heavenly!”

“The sovereign!”

The unicorn is the sovereign of this forest? I see. From its appearance, I understood why the other animals called it that.

“The unicorn's amazing!” Griffy squealed.

“Groo. Cool horn!”

I agree, Noela. Man...there's no way that unicorn's just going to give me its horn if I ask.

“Did you spread this scent around the lake, human?” the unicorn neighed.

Gah! It knows I'm here! There was no point hiding, so I cautiously stepped out from the shadows. Noela clung to my legs. Usually, she was the first to say she'd protect me, but now she was terrified.

“G-greetings, Sovereign,” I stammered. “Um, yes. I spread that scent.”

“Hmph. Just the underhanded tactics I’d expect of a human.” The unicorn had a mature woman’s voice.

“Unicorn lady sound old, Master!”

“Shh!”

“Did you call me old?” the unicorn demanded.

See? You upset her.

“Don’t be rude!” I tousled Noela’s hair. “Sorry this fluffball’s so impolite.”

“I haven’t aged. I’ve simply acquired years in this world.”

Yeah, that’s the kind of thing women past a certain age say.

“You’ve journeyed deep into these woods, human. What’s your target? Me?”

She’s on to me. Guess there’s no point keeping it secret. “Yes. I’m here to ask for your horn.”

“Nonsense.”

“Master’s serious, Ms. Unicorn,” Griffy interjected.

“How rare!” the unicorn exclaimed, noticing Griffy. “Griffins rarely take to humans.” She turned her gaze to Noela, who hid behind me like a shy little kid. “A griffin and a werewolf... Who are you?”

“My name’s Reiji. I run a pharmacy in Kalta, a town a little ways from here.”

“I see. So, you desire my horn?”

“Right. The mother of a little girl in a neighboring town is incurably ill, and she’s dying. I need to create a panacea to save her, and your horn’s a key ingredient.”

“You desire my horn so that you can save a human’s life? Absurd. I’ll never forget how humans attacked my comrades to sell their horns for money!”

Oh, man. I figured someone would’ve done that. After all, the unicorn was a rare creature, and its horn could produce a panacea. If a human—especially an adventurer or hunter—ever spotted a unicorn, they’d immediately try to capture it for its horn.

The beast's hostile blue eyes told me to leave at once.

At this rate, if I want the unicorn's cooperation, I'll need to use the beast-taming kit. "Noela, could you grab some meatballs and the millet dumpling paste from my bag?"

"Yeah." Behind me, Noela dug through the bag, then passed me the meatballs and millet dumpling paste. I added the latter to the former.

"That's Griff's snack, Master!" Griffy objected. When we poured millet dumpling paste on Griffy's bug meatballs, the griffin loved it.

"I'm only using a little. I'll give you some later."

"Just a little," Griffy agreed reluctantly.

Once I'd added millet dumpling paste to the meatballs, they were ready to go.

"What're you doing? Leave Mt. Bizef!" the unicorn ordered.

"Try this!" I tossed a few meatballs toward the unicorn. They bounced and landed at her feet. Would this haughty unicorn stand her ground when she encountered our special meatballs?

"Wh-what are these alluring globes?" The unicorn's hoof nudged them; she was clearly full of curiosity.

"Ah! Master, the unicorn's going to ruin Griff's meatballs!"

"Are these 'meatballs' food?" the unicorn asked.

"My griffin loves them, Ruler. Would you like to try them?" *I hope she won't refuse to eat off the ground.*

The unicorn hesitated.

Heh! I can tell she's tempted. I guess she's wondering whether it's okay to eat food from a wretched human.

"I assume those meatballs must be full of some strange medicine meant to confuse me," the unicorn said. "After all, you're a pharmacist."

I tossed a few more meatballs at her feet.

"Erm..." She knelt down, but she wasn't quite able to get the meatballs into

her mouth. She couldn't bring her head straight down, since her horn got in the way.

She was skeptical, but she'd really like to eat those meatballs.

"Unico want meatballs really bad, Master!"

"It looks like it."

I slowly approached the unicorn. Picking up a few meatballs, I put them in my palm, offering them to the beast. She quickly ate them out of my hand.

"These are scrumptious!" I sensed her hostility vanish quickly, thanks to the millet dumpling paste. I wound up feeding her every meatball. "I desire more."

"I'm all out."

"What did you say...?" The poor unicorn looked astonished.

She must want meatballs as badly as Noela wanted more potions after her first one.

"I'm happy to bring you more meatballs if you'll agree to my request."

"You wish to trade with me, human?" The unicorn stared at me. "Is the sick woman precious to you? Answer me."

I realized there was no way I could lie. "No. She's married, and she's got children. I only just met her."

"Why go out of your way for her, then? What do you stand to gain?"

"Nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"Is it wrong to do something without expecting to gain from it?"

"Humans seek to gain from things constantly."

"Sure—in your experience. You haven't met every human in the world, though."

"Hmph..." the unicorn replied, seeming to acknowledge my logic.

"I promise I'll use the treatments made from your horn for others' welfare."

“I doubt a youngster like you could use my horn properly.”

“Don’t worry. I have a medicine-making skill.” The unicorn gazed at me, waiting for me to continue. “I can’t save everyone in the world, but I want to be able to help the people around me,” I added. “I think that’s why I received that skill.”

She tilted her head down, presenting her horn to me. “Shave some off. I cannot give you my entire horn, but I can provide enough to treat several people.”

“Are you sure?”

“Do it, before I think better of it.”

“Thank you so much.”

Noela brought my plant knife, and I used it to shave off bits of the unicorn’s horn. The werewolf girl also caught the shavings in a bag to keep them off the ground.

As I finished, the unicorn whispered, “I never knew there were humans like you out there.”

She left, trotting back through the bushes.

Our mission accomplished, Griffy, Noela, and I headed home.

I got to work immediately, combining a few unicorn horn shavings with the oronaamsou I’d gotten from a young adventurer a while back. Since I had the ingredients, making the treatment was fairly simple.

Panacea: Medicine that cures any ailment.

I managed to stretch the unicorn horn shavings to make three bottles of panacea. One bottle was apparently an individual dose, so I had enough for three patients.

“Three bottles, huh?” I murmured. *If Noela ever got sick, I could cure her with*

this.

“Can get more shavings, Master,” Noela said beside me, watching me work.

“Uh, how?”

“If ask for more, Unico probably give. Pushover.”

“Forget it.”

I mean, that had occurred to me, but it would’ve been a shame to shave off too much of the unicorn’s horn. Without it, she’d just be a white horse. Plus, it wasn’t that the unicorn was a pushover—the millet dumpling paste just worked amazingly well. *I wish Noela had said that instead.*

“Noela not bribed so easy!” the werewolf girl added.

“Here, have a potion.”

“Groo!”

Pushover.

Chapter 16:

Gratitude for the Panacea

WITH THE FINISHED PANACEA in hand, Noela and I rode Griffy to the Hautbeauxs' home in the neighboring town. Mr. Hautbeaux came out to greet us.

I showed him the freshly made panacea. "I made this from rare materials, including unicorn horn shavings. I'm pretty sure it'll cure your wife's illness."

He bowed his head to me repeatedly. "Thank you so, so much, Mr. Kirio!"

"Mr. Hautbeaux, it's too early to thank me." His words would all be pointless if the treatment didn't cure his wife. *Please work, panacea!*

I visited Mrs. Hautbeaux's bedside, explaining the panacea's effects.

"You did this for me...?" she murmured.

"I got your daughter's request in my request box," I replied. "How could I have ignored it?"

I opened the panacea bottle, and Mrs. Hautbeaux drank its contents. For a moment, she seemed to glow internally, the way a bottle glowed when I finished a new product.

"Any improvements?" I asked.

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think I do feel a bit better." Mrs. Hautbeaux smiled. "Also, that panacea was delicious."

"Master's medicine tasty taste," Noela said proudly.

"I figured I might as well make it taste good."

"Medicine usually tastes terrible!" Mrs. Hautbeaux replied. "I see your products are different, though."

She's a lot more talkative than before.

Beside me, Mr. Hautbeaux listened to us, weeping.

When I was ready to head home, Mr. Hautbeaux told me that he hadn't seen his wife talk so much in years.

"She should be all right now," I told him. *Please, please, please work!*

"The town doctor will visit the day after tomorrow to assess her. Would you mind being there, Mr. Kirio?"

"Of course not." Promising to return in two days, I hurried back to the drugstore.

Noela and I visited the Hautbeauxs' home two days later, only to find that the town doctor—an older gentleman—had begun his examination already.

"How's your cough?" he was asking Mrs. Hautbeaux.

"I still get it now and then, but it doesn't keep me awake anymore."

The doctor tilted his head to the side. "How about fevers or fatigue?"

"None at all. I feel much better!"

"R-really? That's fantastic!" He cocked his head the other way, confused.

"I've also taken to walking around our home," Mrs. Hautbeaux added. "I assumed constant bed rest was no good."

"W-walking?! Isn't that painful?"

"Yes! My muscles are quite sore afterward. I've gotten out of shape!"

Noela tugged my sleeve. "Master. Master."

"What is it? You sure look happy."

"Master's medicine! Success! Duh!" Noela wagged her tail cheerfully.

Mr. Hautbeaux informed his wife that Noela and I had arrived. She and the doctor turned toward us.

"Your medicine's working wonders," Mrs. Hautbeaux told me. "Thank you so much, Mr. Pharmacist!"

"Pharmacist...?" Wide-eyed, the doctor faced me and asked, "Are you from Kalta?"

“Uh-huh. I run Kirio Drugs.”

“Wh-what did you prescribe her?! Her coughing kept her awake, and her fevers were awful—forget being able to walk around! I swore she had less than six months!”

“I mixed a panacea and got her to drink it.”

“A panacea?” The doctor’s eyes narrowed skeptically. “What, did you buy a unicorn horn or something?”

“No. A unicorn let me shave some of her horn off.”

“A unicorn *allowed* that?! Absurd! They seldom show themselves, and they hate humans!”

He doesn’t believe a word I’m saying.

“Most doctors ask an adventurer to get them a unicorn horn at least once,” the town doctor continued. “But I’ve never heard of anyone *succeeding*. And you claim you made a panacea from that?”

“You don’t have to believe me. Anyhow, I’m not a doctor, so I can’t accurately judge Mrs. Hautbeaux’s recovery. The rest’s in your hands.”

With that, Noela and I left the room. The Hautbeauxs’ daughter, Aisha, chased after me.

“Master. Little girl following.”

I waited for Aisha to catch up, curious, and she handed me a wildflower crown. “Mr. Pharmacist, Wolfy...thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome. It was my pleasure to fulfill your request.”

“Fierce battle with unicorn. Noela protect Master!”

Shadowboxing, Noela showed off her courageous deeds to Aisha. *Whoosh! Whoosh!*

Yeah, right. You got scared and hid behind me.

I placed the flower crown on Noela’s head. “Ah! Looking good!”

“Groo!” Noela’s ears twitched, responding to a noise behind us.

Then, Mr. Hautbeaux came running after us, breathless. “Mr. Kirio, please wait! I must give you something as thanks—anything! Just name it, and I’ll do whatever I can!”

Noela and I looked at each other, then back at Mr. Hautbeaux. “That’s fine,” I assured him. “Noela and I were already rewarded. We don’t need anything else. Right, Noela?”

She nodded passionately. “Garroo!”

Mr. Hautbeaux looked utterly confused, but we said goodbye again and headed home.

When we arrived at the drugstore, Mina looked terribly concerned. “How’d it go, Mr. Reiji?”

“Before, Mrs. Hautbeaux was so sick, she couldn’t even get out of bed. Now she’s taking walks around her house.”

“Thank goodness!” Mina said, relieved.

“Mina doubt Master!” Noela pointed accusingly.

“N-not at all! It’s just...this was Mr. Reiji’s first time making medicine for someone so severely ill.”

Truth be told, I was sort of worried too. The panacea I’d made was supposedly effective against Mrs. Hautbeaux’s illness, but until we tried it out, there was no way to know for sure. To test it, I would’ve had to prescribe it to someone else who was dying. On top of that, we only had three bottles.

Hearing Mina, Noela, and I talking, Vivi entered. “Hey, Reiji! You’re super busy lately. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, all good.”

“Aw, come on! Tell me what happened!” the lake spirit whined. “You always leave me in the dark. I-I’m really going to cry this time!”

“That’s a pretty weak threat.” I glared but patted her head nonetheless.

“Good work, Doctor!”

Oh, right—Ejil had a shift today too. “I honestly didn’t do much.”

“Mina said you managed to obtain some unicorn horn shavings,” the demon king replied. “How did everything else work out?”

“Great, all because of the advice you gave us. Thanks a million.”

“Doctor, I...I’m so moved! I’ve never been praised like that before!”

Because you’re a demon king.

“Aw... I’m really the only one who doesn’t know what’s going on?!” Vivi pouted.

“God, like fairy, you can be such a headache.”

“You realize you’re thinking out loud, right?!”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m just messing with you.”

“That’s even worse! And I’m a spirit, not a fairy!”

In her own way, Vivi was an irreplaceable member of the drugstore’s team. Since every single quip got a rise out of her, though, I kept teasing her gleefully.

“Didn’t get potion today, Master.”

“Oh, right. I’ll make you one when I mix the new batch for restock.”

“Noela wait.”

“Good girl.”

I checked to see which products we were low on and then headed for the lab. For some reason, literally everyone followed me.

“Sorry, but don’t you guys have a store to watch?”

Noela raised her hand. “Noela help Master!”

“All right. Fine with me.”

“Garroo!” Wagging her tail happily, she began searching the shelves for ingredients.

“So, why’re you two part-timers in here?”

“Have you forgotten, Doctor? I work at the drugstore so I can learn to make

potions like you,” Ejil replied. “I’ve got to steal your secret techniques so I can make Noela mine!”

“Hear that, fluffball?”

“Ejil no allowed in lab!” Noela crossed her arms.

“Why single me out?!”

Ejil, Noela informed me, had snuck into my lab earlier to make something. “Mystery fluid. Wasted ingredients!”

“Urgh... She’s being so honest, I can’t even argue!”

As Ejil agonized, Vivi chimed in, “So, what were you up to, Reiji? What unicorn were you talking about?”

“Who cares? I’ll fill you in later.”

“Promise? You’re not lying? If you are, I’ll be a hundred times more hurt than anyone else would be!”

“I get it.” I spun Vivi around and sent her back to the drugstore. “Everything okay, Mina?”

Mina had been standing off to one side this whole time, smiling brightly. “Everyone’s here today, so I was just wondering whether I should cook dinner for Vivi and Ejil too.”

“Ah, great idea. We can eat together.”

Noela crossed her arms again. “Ejil leaving. Busy.”

She was definitely lying. There was no way Ejil would turn down an opportunity to have dinner with her. “Busy with what?”

“If Ejil’s busy, *you* ought to invite him to dinner, Noela,” Mina told her.

At this sudden suggestion, Noela’s fur stood on end. “Groo?!”

“If you invite him, I’m sure he’ll join us, no matter what,” Mina reasoned. “He’d probably squirm to dinner armless if he had to!” That seemed a bit creepy—especially since Mina was smiling—but she wasn’t wrong.

Noela paled and looked away. “No busy. Noela’s mistake.”

I knew she was fibbing. Ejil's one thing, but Noela's another. They'll never patch things up, will they?

Mina smiled. "We'll all have dinner together, then."

"Sounds good."

"What would you like to eat, Mr. Reiji?"

"Anythi—" I cut myself off, remembering Mina's note in the request box.

Mina smiled. "What's wrong?"

"‘Anything’ would be a bad answer, right? I should pick something, since we're all eating together."

Mina nodded happily. *Phew*. I'd almost messed up again.

"I'll invite Vivi and Ejil for dinner," Mina said cheerfully, leaving the lab.

Noela placed the ingredients she'd gathered on the table. "Hurry, Master. Noela need potion. Emergency!"

"Well, that's no good. I'd better hurry." I chuckled, and Noela nodded repeatedly.

After replenishing our potion backstock, I moved on to other products. Meanwhile, Noela chugged her fresh potion, one hand on her hip.

"Groo!" I could tell she was satisfied just by the look on her face.

"Kyu!" Griffy chirped outside.

I sipped the black potion Mina had poured me and gazed out the window. Despite the stress of creating the panacea, I figured these peaceful days of us chilling at the store would continue.

Yet again, Kirio Drugs was open for business.

Afterword

HI, EVERYONE! It's me, Kennoji.

Never in a million years did I imagine *Drugstore in Another World* would keep going this long—let alone get a manga (and even an anime) adaptation! I'm so grateful to everyone who helped make this a reality.

As I've said, I first published this particular title on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* ("Let's Be Novelists") during the summer of 2016. Looking back, I've been working on *Drugstore in Another World* for nearly five years. This is the first time I've been involved with a single title for so long.

Back in 2016, I was focused on writing something new and hopefully publishing it as a novel. If it hadn't worked, I would've tried again. I first published on *Narou* in December 2015, so I've got about five years of history on that site. On the other hand, that means barely any time has passed, although I feel like I've been doing this for a decade already. The fact that even someone like me feels like a veteran author just shows how tough this industry can be.

Since 2016, things have changed bit by bit. I have other successful series running now, which is great, but it's also a lot of work. I'm just getting by happily without falling apart.

I'm also currently writing a teen romcom called *Chikan Saresou ni Natteiru S-kyuu Bishoujo wo Tasuketara Tonari no Seki no Osananajimi datta*. Please take a look at that too, if you're interested!

Anyway, this slow, relaxing tale will continue onward! I don't plan to change the vibe anytime soon. So, when the time comes, I'd be happy if you considered picking up the next volume!

—KENNOJI



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